Imagine the Houses

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SPN. Sam/Jess, Sam/Dean, Dean/Jess, Dean/OFCs. NC-17. 39,810 words. For *spn_j2_bigbang* 2008. Warnings for AU, apocalypse, established incest, pregnant sex, schmoop, and angst. Love to *moonlitroses*,

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> *I imagine the houses:*
> *It has been raining, but the rain*
> *is done and the children kept home*
> *have begun opening their doors.*
> Robley Wilson, "I Wish in the City of Your Heart"

Golden Gate goes down on a Tuesday.

Middle of morning rush hour, salt-fog and winter rising up off the water. Some tourist sells CNN his footage from Fort Baker for ten grand, and for hours it's all that's on, over and over: just the same shaky film that shows the beams snapping like twigs, the cables plucked out like puppet strings. Cars spill into the bay. Someone screams in the background, a long, unbroken note that rings in Sam's ears even when the camera cuts back to the solemn-faced anchor, talking about tragedy and alleged terrorism.

People crowd together, every TV in every coffee shop, in every bar. In the student union, three hundred people sit around one screen, hands held tight with strangers. Shaking, gripping hard enough to crack bone: they sit in stunned silence, and every so often someone else walks through the doors with a cell phone clutched in their hands. *Couldn't get a hold*, he says, she says, lips trembling and brows shiny with sweat, cheeks wet.

One girl curls into Sam's side, cries on his shoulder and grips at his sleeve, and he rests his hand awkwardly on her back, over the bony push of her spine under the cotton of her shirt. *It's okay*, he tries to say, and she cries harder, leaves his shirt soaked by the time she pulls away, mumbling wet apologies he can't quite make sense of.

It's all right, he tries again, because that's his job. Because it's what he was brought up to do, to keep people calm, to help. *It's*

all right, but it's an empty promise, a thought sucked up into stale air along with the desperate prayers and empty guesses. There's nothing he can say for sure.

::

There are vigils after dark, and every shop in the city runs out of candles, even the little pink ones for birthdays. After dark, the quad is a deadened mass of people with fireflies dancing in their palms, sniffling and reaching sweaty hands to twist and hold to somebody, to anybody, just to feel close and real.

Sam goes back to his room that night with blue wax under his nails, his fingers sticky from the reflexive grab of strangers. He sits with the phone in his hand for an hour before he finally dials, presses *Send* and waits.

It's me, he says when his brother picks up. *Just saying I'm okay. I didn't know anyone who—*

He sucks in a breath, a year worth of stale air. He coughs.

Just wanted to say that.

There's a heavy pause and finally, he hears Dean exhale, a death rattle from behind his ribs. *Okay*, he agrees.

There's a beat, two, and Sam says, *All right. Yeah*, and Dean says, *Yeah, okay, sure.*

They hang up together.

::

On Friday, the Tower of Pisa topples over backwards. The Sydney Opera House shatters. In Cawker City, Kansas, the world's largest ball of twine kills four people. There are six dorm fires over the weekend. Six girls die. Coincidence, everyone says, uneasy.

Sam doodles protective runes in the margins of his class notes on

Monday. It's a habit he shook three months into college, but suddenly, the page is covered with twisting knots and ancient sigils in blue ink and pencil, for every lecture he sits through that week. This girl with black hair and make-up, dark clothes and two rings through her lower lip—she leans over his shoulder and stares, eyebrows going up. He files the page away in a hurry. It rips in his hand.

Later, he'll look on this as a sign, as something important that should have made sense. Now, it's more coincidence, a nervous habit back to visit for finals. It's the same as how he bites the ends of his pencils, nibbles the erasers when he's trying to think.

Later, he will think he should have noticed, and he'll curse himself over and over again for ignoring obvious signs.

His brother calls twice that week. Sam doesn't pick up.

One.

It snows on Wednesday. Half the school tumbles outside to look, laughing, pointing, smiling for the first time in days. Semester winding down with Christmas just a week away: someone hooks up a CD player and a set of speakers, and Bing Crosby wishes aloud for days merry and bright. People laugh, dancing right there on the quad, twirling and singing along.

Sam watches from the first-floor library windows, smiling to himself. He itches to join them, thumbs the pages of his textbook idly. The exam isn't until the end of the week. Studying can wait a bit.

He watches, and the sea of faces lights up happy for the first time all week. He thinks maybe he'll call Dean, try and meet up for Christmas. Try and talk to Dad, if he's around, get things better by a little, at least. It'd beat sitting all alone in a cheap motel after they kick him out of the dorms for the break. Once was enough for that, and he doesn't need Dean to make the *Shining* jokes for him to realize that being cooped up alone for a month does him no

good.

The first rock hits the window with a sound like a bell, shakes him out of his thoughts. For one confused moment, Sam thinks it's just the music outside, but then the people stop. The singing dies out. They slow, raise their faces and their mittened hands up to the sky, pointing at the cloudy white.

"Was that *hail*?" someone says loudly from the next table, and the librarian says, "Shh!"

She glares through cat-eyed glasses hooked around her neck with a beaded chain, severe with an iron-grey bun in her hair. She looks like every angry movie school marm, every bitter neighborlady.

The next rock cracks the glass. Breaks through and rolls heavily to a stop on top of Sam's notes. The girl beside him blinks slowly, mouth open.

"Is that…?" she says, but there's not time to answer. He picks up the rock, a hunk of granite, big enough that it almost fills his palm. It's hot in his hand.

Outside, people start screaming.

"Now *really*!" snaps the librarian, rising to her feet, hands planted firmly on her desk.

"*Fuck*!" somebody yells. Then: "Shit, *run*!"

Pebbles rain down through the broken glass. Hunks of quartz and asphalt. People crowd to the windows looking for who's throwing them, but outside, everyone is scrambling, running with their arms over their heads. Stones tumble out of the sky, heavier. They grow bigger with every passing second.

No, he tries to say, getting shakily to his feet. People stream outside. The librarian cowers behind her desk.

The girl across the table is staring outside, horrified. "Oh, my

God," she whispers, takes one unconscious step back. Her chair tips over and hits the ground.

"No," Sam says, aloud this time. He reaches out and catches her wrist. "Don't go out there." He searches the room. "We gotta get underground."

They stumble towards the stacks on coltish legs, glass shattering in the background. One hit breaks through the ceiling, plaster raining down. "Underground," he says again, louder, and people turn to look. Just inside the door, there's a group following them, pushing and crying.

They're four stories down before the sound fades, before the walls stand still.

"We wait it out," someone says. She's a dark-haired, wiry girl with skinny legs and arms, a bony shape. She leans back against the wall and slides to the floor, adjusts the glasses on the bridge of her nose. "It's gotta stop sometime," she says, as reasonable as Sam wishes he felt, though her eyes are shining and a little wild behind her thick frames. "It's gotta stop sometime, so we wait it out."

The girl by Sam's side gently pries his fingers from her wrist, smiles up at him weakly when he feels his cheeks go hot.

"It'll be okay," she declares to the room, and everyone looks at her, doubtful and scared. She swallows. "We'll be all right."

There's another crash, a distant thunk, and maybe a muffled scream.

The room goes dark.

::

Four floors underground, stumbling around in the dark, they finally find flashlights. Three of them stowed in a desk at the far end of the room. They prop one in the middle of the floor, shining up.

Sharp shadows and scared faces, scared eyes.

Sam checks his watch. They've been under for four hours, barely a word said since the lights went out.

People pace, or sit in corners, or curl up and try to sleep. Seventeen of them in all.

The blonde girl he pulled under is scanning the bookshelves, as if hopeful for an answer. She gives in after an hour, scans the room and finally settles on Sam. She drops quietly to the floor beside him.

"The Reference section," she says bitterly. "A million and one encyclopedias and not a novel in sight."

He cracks a weak smile. "Coulda been worse. Romances, maybe."

She shudders. "Or Westerns. Imagine, surviving the apocalypse and all you've got to read is Louis Lamour." She sighs, hugs her knees. Lets go after a second so she can hold out a hand. "I'm Jess."

He takes it. "Sam. Are you—?"

"Second year, yeah. You too?" He nods, and she pauses, then: "Hey, you think they'll cancel the rest of our exams if the world ends? I've got this Chem final on Friday, and—"

"The world isn't going to end," he says, like he knows, like he's sure. Like Dad ever prepared them for this.

"How long do you think it'll last?"

He shrugs. Hours. Days. Months. "Depends on the mythology, I guess."

She groans. "You're not a Classics major, are you?"

Sam laughs at that. "No," he assures her. "Pre-law."

"My dad's a lawyer," Jess says brightly. She pauses. "You think this goes down to Fresno?

He does, but he doesn't say it. "I don't know," he lies. He thinks of collapsing monuments spread all across the world.

Jess sighs, heavy, so her whole body shakes with it. "Tell me about your family," she says, slumping lower against the wall.

Sam shrugs. "Not much to tell. You go first."

::

For the first week, they will go back and forth: favorite book, favorite movie. Trivial, little things that don't matter. Everyone else looks at them like they're insane, arguing if *Bluebeard* is better than *Slaughterhouse-Five* or not: like they're crazy for carrying on like normal.

"I want to be Circe Berman when I grow up," Jess declares, the same tone they all used when they wanted to be astronauts at age five. She pauses to think. "That makes you Rabo Karabekian."

"I have two eyes. And I can't draw."

Jess shrugs. "Who knows, by the end of this? Maybe you'll get hit with a rock when you go outside and bam! No eye. You might get hit with sudden inspiration, too. Find artistic skills you never knew you had. Didn't you ever do arts and crafts at camp, at least?"

"You people are fuckin' crazy," mutters Miles-the-football-player in the corner. The brim of his baseball cap is pulled down over his eyes, a modern-day cowboy looking for rest.

Sam grins. "So it goes," he mutters, under his breath. It's not all that funny, but Jess doesn't stop giggling for five minutes.

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There are vending machines in the lobby. At dawn, their humble expedition ventures upstairs with coats to fill with food, empty plastic bottles for water from the fountain. The storm has its pitch, now, raining down steadily, raining black.

Miles wipes at the back of his neck, comes to a standstill as he stares at his palm. "What the hell," he says hoarsely, and Sam turns to look. He holds out his hand. "Jesus Christ, man, it's *blood*."

It comes down steady, like a summer storm. Comes down hot on their shoulders when they bow their heads. Sticky puddles well up on the floor.

"Come on," Sam says. "We've gotta get this. It's going to get worse."

Under the brim of his cap, Miles goes pale. "Worse?" he asks faintly, and Sam says, "Yeah. Worse before it gets better. Come on, help me with this."

They break the glass with a chair, stuff their coats with chips and cookies and candies. They clean the machine out and fill their bottles. They get back underground just as the lightning sets in, just as fire starts falling like rain, fizzling on the bloodied floors.

::

On what they think is Saturday, Melanie from the help desk finds a pack of cards in a drawer. "Good old Walt," she says fondly, then holds up the deck. "Guy had a gambling problem." She pauses. "He also kinda sucked at poker. Didn't work out so well for him."

Sam sits off to the side and watches them play: Mel and Laura and Allie, who all look practically identical, small and cheery and blonde, smiling to cover up how scared they are. Luke, who Sam's pretty sure was in his Latin class, has never played poker in his life, and they try teaching him but mostly they laugh, make jokes about a sheltered life, poor little farm boy who's never seen a deck of cards in his life.

Allie crows her victory, scoops up imaginary chips. She beams around the room, gathers their faint smiles like they're worth something. "You guys wanna play?" she asks. "Come on, you haven't got anything better to do."

"Strip poker!" cheers Mel, and Luke's eyes go wide, alarmed.

"I don't think—" he says faintly, and she laughs, reaches out to ruffle his lank, straw-colored hair.

"She's kidding," Laura soothes. Her eyes flick from Luke to Mel and back, and her smile widens, almost predatory. She tugs noticeably on Allie's sleeve.

Beside Sam, Jess giggles, and he gives her a look. She shrugs. Says in a defensive whisper, "What? We're stuck at the end of the world. Might as well hook someone up while we're at it."

Sam mimics Dean's cocked eyebrow as best he can. "Does this come with being blonde?" he whispers back.

She shoves him, laughing.

::

They sleep when there's nothing else. Their voices are thin and tired, mindless chatter filling empty spaces that just keep stretching wider, colder. The card game fades to the sad space-filler it is, and they put out the flashlights one by one to hide in the dark.

Jess settles herself beside Sam, her head on his shoulder. He leans heavily against the wall, lets his eyes slip shut. He prays, silently, for a night without dreams. With everyone quiet, they can hear the storm raging again, the pounding of rocks overhead, but at least there's no one left to scream.

"Is it us, do you think?" Jess mumbles, half-dreaming, into the sleeve of his shirt. "Are we all that's left?"

He shakes his head, though she can't see. She wraps her small fingers around his wrist, holding him still. "You saved me," she says, soft enough so only he can hear. "I would've run out, just like everyone else."

"Sleep," he says firmly, tugs his wrist free. They've had half-naps, enough time to still function, but no real sleep for four days. Jess nods, murmurs some assent. Her head droops heavier still on his shoulder.

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He dreams only in sound. Someone's crying, someone's screaming, so far off he can't make it out. He hears screeching tires, a car slipping back and forth on the bloody roads.

He wakes to the sound of gunshots, jerks back into the darkened library with Jess shaking his shoulders saying, *Wake up wake up wake up*, and, when he does, "Breathe, okay? Come on, Sam, just breathe. It was just a dream. Just a dream."

Sam zeroes in on the concrete things, on the vague shape of her in the dark, on her trembling fingers still on his shoulders, fisted in his shirt.

"I'm fine," he says. His heart rabbits in his chest. His ribs ache. *Let it be a dream. Just a normal dream.*

Across the room, a girl starts screaming. Someone scrambles for a flashlight, and the beam is blinding. Someone says, "What happened?" and, "Who screamed?" and, "What's going on? I heard someone scream—"

The light sweeps the room, catches them one by one. Mel is crying, her lower lip trembling.

"There," she says, pointing. The light follows her finger to the back corner, to a limp body half-hidden behind a bookcase.

"Oh, my God," Jess whispers. She peels away from Sam's side and crosses the room in fluttering red shadow. She drops to her knees beside Allie, sprawled out flat on the ground. "Give me the light!" Jess calls, and Luke obediently follows with the flashlight, moving stilted and scared.

"Shit," he says, and the light shakes in his hand. "She's—"

"Don't drop it," Jess says tersely, and he tightens his grip, leans back against the bookcase.

"What's going on?" someone demands, and the crowd pushes in.

Jess peels her shirt back, the front soaked with blood. Allie whimpers, tries to say something but can't. Her eyes are glassy in the dim glow of the flashlight. "I think… She's been shot," Jess says, like she can't believe she's saying it herself. Numbly, she fumbles for the girl's wrist, looking for a pulse. "She's… Just now. Is anyone here—?" She looks around desperately. "Is anyone a med student?"

Miles's breath whistles out from between his teeth. "It's an undergrad library. Med school's on the other side of campus."

Jess gestures for the light and Luke holds out his arm, lets it dangle between two fingers, like he's not willing to get any closer.

"There," Jess points, and her hand shakes. "Her stomach. God, she… We can't help her." She rocks back from her knees, settles weakly onto the ground. "There's nothing we can do down here. She's going to die."

"But there wasn't a gun," says Luke desperately. "Nobody heard a gun, did they?" He turns this way and that, scanning everyone's faces. "There wasn't a gun. She can't just—"

Allie cries out softly, her body tensing. She twists weakly on the floor.

"We need something to stop the blood," Jess says. Her gaze

sweeps over them, waiting.

"Until what?" someone else demands. He's a dark-haired skinny kid, angry looking behind his glasses. It's the first time he's spoken. "Look, you said so yourself, she's—"

Another whimper, cutting him off. Jess falls silent mid-protest, still on her knees, her hands bloody.

Later, she shrinks into the farthest corner, where the flashlights can't find her. Sam spends a good five minutes stumbling around, trying not to kick her or knock over bookshelves that could domino and crush them all. It's the last thing they need.

"You okay?" he says to the spot where he thinks he can see her outline. Above her is a barely-illuminated cardboard sign reading, *Atlases*. The handwriting is big and bubbly, pointlessly happy.

Her sigh comes from a few feet to the left, and he turns, sits slowly, careful not to drop on top of her.

"It's all so useless," she says quietly, and he hears the rustle of her skirt when she shifts closer, rests her head on his shoulder.

"You were good back there," he says gently. "You did what you could, Jess."

"I wanted to go to med school," she admits, a bitter little laugh chasing the thought. "Candy striped. Watched a lot of medical drama on TV. Never had to deal with anything serious, just knew a little of this. Little of that." She drops her chin down onto her knees, curves her back. "Everything here, it's just… What if it never ends?"

Sam doesn't answer. He's still more worried about what will be left when it does.

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They wake with aching limbs, stiff with the awkward angle, Sam's

arm around Jessica's shoulders and her fingers tangling with his, holding tight while she fell asleep, loosening when she finally dropped off.

They wake sore from the cold walls, from the dirty tiles underneath them. They wake to screaming.

Sam clambers to his feet, half-asleep and disoriented, and he nearly pushes Jess into a wall trying to help her up. They shuffle back to the group, find them crowded around the skinny kid with the glasses, limp on the floor. Stains slowly bleed through his clothing.

"Oh, God, was he—?" Jess whispers, and Laura leans down, rips past the buttons of his shirt. Angry wounds gape open, invisible knives twisted over and over into his skin. They never broke through the cloth.

There is no wondering with this one, no scrambling to help. Fifteen of them stand huddled together, left with silence and the cold, helpless knowledge trickling down their spines.

"It's something to do with the storm, right?" Luke says finally, when they've turned their backs on the body, not daring to move him. They sit in a circle with the light in the middle, stare at it like it's a campfire, only none of them feel like singing.

"Rocks falling from the sky?" Mel asks. "It's just as weird, isn't it?"

Nobody else bothers to answer.

::

Five hours later, it's Evan, this spiky-haired guy wearing a Metallica shirt. He chokes on nothing while he's pacing the aisles, clutching his throat with his lips turning blue. He's dead before he even hits the floor. Sam watches him and thinks of Dean, thinks of an ever-ringing phone.

Ten minutes after that, the beautiful black girl Sam remembers

from poli-sci starts mumbling something about the heat, shivering but tugging off her jacket. Her forehead burns under Sam's palm, and she speaks gibberish, something about doctors and needles and melting ice, something about people dying in the streets.

"I think it's—it's something different, I think. We gotta cool her off," he says, folds the girl's jacket under her head like a pillow and she cries, trying to curl in on herself.

Someone strips off a shirt and soaks it in water, room-temperature, but it'll have to do. They press it to her forehead and drops slip down the sides of her face, doing nothing to help. The cloth dries in their hands, the heat too much for it. She stops breathing before they can wet it again.

It takes nine of them in all. Burning and freezing, gunshots and invisible ropes snapping their necks. The bodies pile higher, and their circle grows tighter around the light.

"We gotta get them outta here," mutters Miles. He nods to the bodies, trains his eyes on Sam. "Before they start to stink, man. We've gotta move them out."

Everyone turns to look at him, faces blank, but he stands his ground. His great shoulders shaking and his powerful jaw all but set to quiver. "We've got to do *something*," he insists desperately, and Sam nods, swallows the bile bubbling up in his throat.

"Downstairs," he says softly. "There's another floor, right? We can't go up." There's a dull pounding overhead. He doesn't want to think about blocked exits just yet.

Jess looks at him with a pained expression. "We can't just *leave* them. When this is over, I mean. We can't just… this is a *library*, not…"

She trails off, and suddenly she's choking down on something. Sam's chest clenches and he follows blindly as she wobbles to her feet. She barely makes it to the stairwell door before she's on her knees, retching onto the cold linoleum floor.

He holds the wispy length of her hair back, hand bracing, holding her up.

"You're okay," he says, and Jess sobs. He soothes his palm over her curved shoulders. "You're okay."

Flushed with shame, with fear, she tugs away and takes the water he gives her with trembling fingers. "Thanks," she mumbles.

Back in the main stacks, the others give her fearful looks, like she's about to keel over dead from some mystery poison running through her blood.

"I'm fine," she says, voice scratchy-tight. They look away, avert their eyes. They act like they're preparing for ten minutes from now when she's gone, and Sam hates them for it, but he isn't sure he can blame them. His stomach tightens painfully at the thought.

"Okay," Sam says, makes his voice loud, too loud in the hush. They haven't spoken like this in days. They keep their tones low, like cemetery whispers.

Sam turns to Miles. He nods to the bodies. "We've gotta do something," he agrees, pushing up his sleeves.

He sleeps with bloody hands that night, with brown etched into the lines of his palms and the whorls of his fingerprints like police-file ink. He wakes with Jess sitting beside him but looking away. He sits carefully and says, "Hey. You all right?"

Her smile is bleak, thin. "How much longer, d'you think?" she says. Her stomach rumbles. She hugs herself like she's cold. "What if we're not meant to wait it out? What if it lasts longer than we do?"

Sam has though about it, has wondered the same thing a dozen times since they've been down here. He won't tell her.

"We should make another trip upstairs," he says instead, glancing up at the ceiling. It's quiet, now. Even the distant rattles they've

grown used to are still. "See if there's another machine. Get more water. I think it's all right for a bit."

She puts her hand on his arm when he makes to stand up. "You know more than you're telling," she says softly, enough that nobody else will hear. She shouldn't bother: nobody else will listen, all too busy trying to ignore anything but harmless dark.

Sam tenses. Shakes his head.

"Naw," he says, aw-shucks country boy grin that he used to be good at. "Just pretending. Just like everyone else." He pulls his bloody sleeve out of her grasp, smiles to show teeth, like look, look how you can trust me.

Jess lets him go without a fight.

Upstairs, the windows are gaping and parts of the ceiling are missing. The pause in the storm, just embers and mist, but the horizon is a thin line of black, and the rumble of approaching thunder is louder than he's ever heard before.

There's a second vending machine tucked away near the bathrooms, and he kicks at the glass until it breaks to get inside. He cuts his hand pulling out bags of chips and cookies and bottles of drink, enough to last a few more days. All there is.

The hail comes again just as he goes back underground. One stone smacks hard at the back of his head. He'll still have a knot when they come up out of hiding five days later.

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Eventually, the flashlight batteries blink out and die. The food runs out, the water bottles go dry. There are fifteen notches carved into the wall and eight of them still alive to know it.

They wait to go up until there's nothing left to lose.

"Fuckin' might as well," Miles says, his eyes on the ceiling.

Someone's stomach rumbles. They listen for close to an hour and can't hear anything overhead.

When they're ready, they move as one, getting slowly to their feet, navigating the stairs uneasily. Jess squeezes Sam's hand, smiles weakly up at him as they take their steps together.

The door sticks a little before it opens, and they're all left squinting. Beyond the ruined walls of the library, the sun is brilliant, blinding them.

imagine the houses, part 2

Two.

Dean is in Chicago when it starts. Tangled up in silky sheets in the good part of town, sprawled out naked beside a girl with bony shoulders, with long limbs and thin muscles. There's a practice barre hanging in her living room, cutting across the clean white walls that face the cool black marble of her kitchen counters. Flowing dresses drape over wooden hangers in her closet. Boxes of slippers and finely-made shoes line the floor.

It starts with fiery rain. The insect screens catch and spark and melt and burn, curl in on themselves like autumn leaves, like scraps of brown crunched under heavy, black boots.

He spends five minutes shaking the girl awake and then finally sees she's already dead, notices the purple marks on her throat like handprints, the papery-dead feel of her skin, dry hands and elbows and cheeks.

I didn't, he thinks numbly, his hands falling away. Outside, thunder rolls and a howling wind picks up. Ice chips tumble out of the sky. Dean mumbles to himself, over and over, *I wouldn't, I didn't*.

Beyond the window glass, the streets are empty. Hailstones pile up on the sidewalks and in the streets, carpeting the world, burying the city, covering up its living and its dead.

::

He leaves that afternoon, steals out of the dead ballerina's apartment like a thief.

The phones don't work, no signal anywhere. All the towers down, maybe, strategic destruction, resurrection, rebirth. A cleansing, Dean thinks, but then, he's still alive.

The phones don't work, but he keeps his on in the Chevy's front

seat, waiting for it to spring to life. He tries calling Dad and Sam, Caleb or Jim, even Bobby, who he hasn't seen in damn close to a decade, but the lines are silent, won't even give him a dead, flat tone.

By the time he finds the car, by the time he gets it started, rocks are falling, and he says a silent prayer for the body and the paint, promises his girl he'll fix it later, one hand brushing gently over the dash. He drives out like a madman, the radio blasting and the roof chattering with falling rocks and hail.

The Guard is trickling in by the time he gets to the city limits, no traffic jam, with everyone dead or still hiding inside, but the road is covered, and he can't see a thing.

"Fuck if we know," shouts one man through the Chevy's cracked window, squinting, hissing at the stones on his helmet. "Can't get the planes high enough to see where it started. Christian Right's screaming 'bout Armageddon." He laughs bitterly, shrugging his shouldered gun into place. "S'like this all over," he says. "Deployment's to the big cities. Fuck, kid, I don't know where you think you're gonna go."

::

Night never falls. Dean drives on under the assault of ice and rock, fire licking at the road ahead of him. He stops under an overpass when it gets to be too much, and the car makes a sound like a sigh, tired and scared.

"I know, baby," he says aloud. He strokes a hand gently over the wheel, the dash. "It'll be okay."

He falls asleep and wakes to a foot of stone blocking the road. The rocks flip up under the wheels, hit the car's belly with loud, unforgiving noises when he inches forward, wincing. People must have gotten out when it was supposed to be night, and the roads are no longer empty, hundreds of cars trembling on through the storm.

They're doing fifteen on I-80 when his phone springs to life in the passenger seat. A feeble single bar flickers in and out of range. The phone beeps twice, tells him, *You Have 1 New Text Message.*

"Gotta be fuckin' kidding me," Dean mutters under his breath. He hits the buttons with one eye on the stop-motion traffic, reads: *still in nola. find sam.*

He scrolls down for more, but that's all there is, Dad's hasty message and a little note telling him it was sent sometime yesterday, early. Dean runs through the math in his head, when he left and the time difference. He feels the guilty flush come up from his collar, knowing he was still asleep when Dad was already making plans, thinking how to get them all by.

He tries calling again, but there's only dead silence when he puts the phone to his ear.

::

The cars thin out by Nebraska. People turn off the highways looking for their families, looking for safe haven, for God knows what. He sleeps pulled over under the cover of a bridge, knees pushing up against the wheel, gear shift digging hard into his leg. He nods off to the sound of blood overhead like rain, almost peaceful. He wakes to a shining sun, to people spilling out of the woodwork, laughing and singing.

"No," he tells them hoarsely through the cracked car window. "No, you've gotta—*listen* to me, there's always a trick; it's all a lie—" but they don't stop. Maybe they can't hear him, his voice unused for days, or maybe they just don't care.

Two hours later, Dean weaves past desperate bodies and cracks in the roads. Bullets fall out of the sky, slow at first and then there's thunder like canon fire, and the sky splits apart at the seams.

Every gun for every child and woman and man, they'll say later, all coming back to earth to get their revenge.

Months from now, he will sit with strangers around a fire in a village of lean-to cabins and tents, sit in the dark and listen to a man with a Bible tell them how this is punishment from God, because the fury of grief and death must breed suffering in return. *Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord*, and so only God has the right to kill. Scraggly beard growing up on his cheeks in the flick of the fire, the man will let the book fall shut on his knee and say it's for all the wars, for all the murders. For every life taken or given without cause—they must pay back their wrongs.

Bullets fall out of the sky and people lie bleeding on the ground, hold out weakly curved fingers wet with water and blood. They whisper for help, for anything.

At the map-edge of Utah, Dean finally pulls over, sick in his stomach with his hands shaking beyond the control he needs on the wheel. He throws the remnants of his meager food stores into their hands, cans and dried soups he stole from the dancer's apartment on his way out. He gives them the water and the first aid kid. He almost gives them the car, let better people go on, but Dad's orders hold him back. *Find Sam*, he'd said, and Dean set his sights on California without another thought. He'd headed West already.

The desperate, dying people, they drop to their knees and raise their hands to him, cry at his feet mumbling, *thank you, thank you*, and Dean shakes his head, violent, tries to back away.

"No," he croaks. His throat feels like sandpaper, his tongue heavy with dust. The water and blood soak his clothes, slip past his collar and roll steadily down his spine, tickling. "No, please, I didn't… It's what anyone would do, I just—"

One girl steps up to him, her hands crossed over her chest, hugging herself, rubbing at the goose bumps raised on her arms.

"Can you take us?" she asks him. Dark hair, dark skin, dark eyes: she looks more familiar than he'd care to think. He wonders how bad things are in Missouri.

He grips the keys tighter in his hand. They cut into his palm. There will be a little purple bite through his lifeline for half a week, after this.

Backed up against the car, fumbling for the door, Dean says, "I can only take four. Maybe five."

He ends up with seven children pressed together in the back seat, dirty hands clinging to each other, and the girl in the seat beside him, a dead-eyed little boy squeezed into the space between them.

"Their parents are all dead," the girl tells him. "I worked at the day care. They were the ones left. My family's in Vegas. I couldn't leave them."

Dean nods, lump in his throat. "Yeah," he agrees dimly, eyes flicking back to the rearview every ten seconds. The windshield wipers smear blood over the glass, dark brown stains that dry as soon as they're wiped thin enough.

"Fuck," he hisses, and she gives him a sharp look.

"They're *kids*," she says, annoyed. Dean doesn't speak again until they cross into Nevada.

::

She tells him about her family as they make their way through the desert, flooded. They crawl through standing water all but holding their breath.

"We were always close," she says. "When I moved away, it was this huge thing, even if I was only a few hours out." She stares out of the window. "Me and my sisters were all bawling, but it was nothing compared to mom." They were triplets, always dressed alike, always together, until they went to college without her and she moved out of state with her boyfriend and started working at a day care.

"He's gone, too," she says quietly. "I couldn't get a hold of him, and he wasn't at home. I left them to check."

The little boy between them turns his head to look up at her, and she smiles thinly. She squeezes his small hand in hers. "It's okay, Patrick," she says calmly, and he nods and looks straight ahead again, staring at the watery roads.

"Miss Cora," says one of the girls in the back. "How much longer?"

"It could be a while," Cora admits, twisting in her seat to look at them. "The roads are bad. But you all can be good, right? Try to sleep. It's been a long few days. You could use some sleep, all of you."

They fall silent slowly, and when she turns back to Dean, she speaks in a whisper.

"You never told me about you," she says.

His hands flex unconsciously on the wheel. "There's not much to tell. Going to find my brother."

She nods, folds her hands patiently in her lap. "What's he like, your brother?"

Dean laughs shortly. "Pain in the ass."

Cora smiles. "I know what you mean," she says.

Dean shoves a tape in the deck, something of Dad's. There's static, the hiss of the worn-out tape, and then the low, gritty blues guitar, the half-dead voice behind the strings.

It carries them on through the desert, inch by inch.

::

Her house is still standing. The doors swing open and shut, clap loudly against the walls. Just inside, the doorways are all charred

and flooded.

"They might still be alive, then," Cora says. "They might come home." She looks up at Dean, her fingers on the worn cuff of his sleeve.

Dean nods absently. Eying the horizon, he says, "We should get them inside." He nods to the kids, the whole group of them lined up and staring at the house like they don't know what to make of it.

The power still works, the water still running. Inside, Cora shuffles them all through the bath and then puts the kids in her parents' room, finds them dry clothes and towels, gives them storybooks and tells Grace to read aloud while she fixes them dinner.

"Yes, Miss Cora," Grace says and opens the book on her lap, reads aloud in a practiced, clear reading voice: "*Congratulations! Today is your day! You're off to great places! You're off and away!*" She doesn't sound out her words, doesn't waver. The pages don't tremble in her hands.

In the kitchen, Cora digs through the pantry and comes up with packets of powdered soups and EZ-Mac. She boils water with her hair hanging in her face, pretending not to look at him when she says, "Will you stay with us?"

Dean drops the quarter he's fiddling with on the kitchen table. Cora peeks up from the stove, reaching for a wooden spoon. "Please."

He swallows hard, shakes his head. "I can't. I have to find my brother. My Dad—" He stops, grateful, cut off by her nod.

She mumbles, "No, don't worry, it was stupid to ask—" and he gets up from the table, joins her by the stove.

With one hand on her shoulder, Dean says, "I can stay for a few days. Until the storm stops. Make sure you're all okay."

She laughs, twisting away from him and dragging back a chair from the table. "You think it's going to?"

Dean shrugs. "We're still alive. We wouldn't be left here if it was gonna keep on forever. That's not how it works."

She gives him a curious look. "How'd you know how it works?"

He clears his throat, scratching at the back of his neck.

"Pot's gonna boil over," he says.

::

There's an old grandfather clock in the living room, polished wood and clean glass. It tolls steadily at every hour. They put the kids to bed together, fluff pillows and spread blankets. Cora tells some fairytale they must have heard a dozen times before, and Dean stands in the doorway and flicks out the light when it's done, stands aside so she can pass him and shut the door.

"You gonna be okay with them?"

She cocks an eyebrow at him. "We were on our own for over a week before you came along, Dean. We'll be fine."

"I didn't mean—"

She shakes her head. "I know." She hesitates. Says, "Hey, listen, we can… I mean, if you want to. My room's upstairs, they won't hear—"

He takes a step back and hits the wall with a soft thump. "You don't owe me anything."

Cora smiles sadly, inches closer. "Yes, I do. But that's not why. I want—I'd like to, if you're interested. I mean, who knows? Might be for the last time."

"It won't be," he says quickly. "There's gotta be others left. Even

got through the phone lines once, coming this way. Text from my dad. It's all gonna be okay soon."

"It won't be like before." She says it almost accusingly, head tilted back a little to look him in the eye, pointed, like she's waiting for him to deny it.

"No," he admits. "It won't be like before. But you're gonna make it, Cora. You and the kids—you'll all be fine. And you'll take good care of them."

She nods absently. "Yeah. Thanks." She eyes him for a moment, like figuring a riddle. Finally, she sighs, lifts her slim fingers to brush his arm. "Come upstairs," she says, like she's asking for his permission.

Dumbly, Dean nods. Cora smiles, and gestures for him to follow when she turns her back.

::

They've only been asleep for an hour when they hear frantic little footsteps on the stairs. A small fist starts pounding on the door.

Cora tugs an oversized *Cirque de Soleil* tee-shirt over her head and goes to the door. Grace trembles in the light from the hallway.

"Miss Cora, Jamie's sick. He—"

"Jesus," Cora says. "I'm coming." She throws a look over her shoulder at Dean, sitting up in bed and looking alarmed.

"What do you need?" he asks. "I can—"

She shakes her head. "You don't—just stay here. I'm sure it's fine. I'll be right back."

He gets up anyway, as soon as the door shuts. He pulls on his clothes in the dark, struggles his way into his shirt and doesn't even bother with his belt, just kicks it out of the way and stumbles

down the stairs.

By the time he makes it down, Cora's moved Jamie to the guest room. She sits on the edge of the bed holding a hand to his forehead. She snaps around when she hears him coming.

"He's burning up. Can you—stay with him, okay? I'll go see what we've got in the medicine cabinet."

She shuffles off to the bathroom and Dean sinks into the spot she vacated on the bed. Jamie curls onto his side, whimpering.

"You're gonna be fine," Dean promises him. The boy cracks open an eye. "Cora's gonna be right back," Dean says. "You'll be feeling good as new by morning, man. You're tough, right?"

Footsteps sound again in the hall. Cora pushes the door open with her back, a bottle of child's Tylenol squeezed into the crook of her elbow. She balances a basin of water in her hands, washcloths draped over her arm.

"I can't find the thermometer," she says helplessly, pulling Jamie up to sit, pressing a pill into his hand. "Search around for it, will you? In one of the bathroom drawers, I think. God, this is all such a mess." She turns her attention to the boy. "Jamie? Honey? Can you hear me?"

Jamie mumbles something unintelligible, eyes falling shut.

::

The fever breaks the next afternoon, Jamie shivering through the sheen of sweat on his face, dampening his clothes. He curls onto his side, small, wounded sounds slipping from his mouth, and Cora leaves Dean to look after him while she brews chicken soup out of a dry packet for everyone's breakfast. They manage to force a few tablespoons down the boy's throat before he goes back to sleep.

After, they hook up a battered old VCR and the kids watch old Disney classics in the living room, all squeezed onto the one

couch, even though there are two arm chairs and plenty of pillows and blankets on the floor.

"We'll be fine," Cora says to Dean, watching the kids watch *Peter Pan*. They stare silently at the screen, a bowl of popcorn untouched on the floor in front of them. They don't whisper back and forth over the movie. They don't laugh at any of the jokes.

Outside, the storm has stilled, turned to the soft clinking of stray pebbles, the spatter of drying blood. Once, Grace swears she saw snow outside, but the flakes got lost and melted too soon for anyone else to see.

Dean stands beside Cora, his bag slung over his back. "You think you can handle them," he says, and she shrugs. A tangle of black curls rises and sinks around her shoulders, but her face breaks, and she turns away from the kids, presses her face to his neck.

"We'll be fine," she says again, and her fingernails bite at the flesh of his arm.

"I'll come back," Dean promises softly. "After I find Sam, or if—I'll come back to see you."

She lifts her eyes to look at him. "Would you stay?"

Dean hesitates. "I can't promise that."

"Okay," she says. She lets her hand drop to his, twists their fingers together. Then, nodding out the window, she asks, "You think this is the last of it?"

"I hope so. It… I dunno."

"It feels like it is," she says, and he smiles.

"Yeah. It does."

Cora grips his hand a moment longer, then drops it. "Hey, guys," she calls to the kids. "Dean's leaving. You want to say goodbye?"

The file past him one by one, hug him and mumble their thank-yous into his belly. When they've all settled back into watching the movie, Cora walks him onto the porch.

"Feels weird, doesn't it?" she says. "That it would just taper off? After all the damage it did?"

Dean looks out at the horizon. "There's not much out there," he warns her. She winds her arms around him, then, squeezes hard. She's a tiny little thing, but she still crushes the air from his lungs.

"I'll be back," he promises the top of her head. "Soon. I'll come back to see you soon."

He leaves her a gun and two boxes of ammo before he goes, just in case. By the time the new sun rises, he's long gone. The Chevy's tracks in the mud fade under the last trickle of the storm, and the horizon stretches out wide and empty.

::

In Palo Alto, he drives under a baking sun through ruined buildings. There are crumpled couples by the side of the road, shivery groups of students clinging to each other, bleeding and dying and dead. Food ran out, water ran out, and three days after the storm stops, this is as far as they got. He has nothing to give them, all his provisions scattered out from Illinois to here, just half a bottle of tepid water sloshing in his front seat. He thinks vaguely of dried-out husks of countrysides, of crosses ticking off miles by the sides of the road.

He's been to Sam's dorm half a dozen times this year, just sitting in the lot behind it and staring up at his brother's lighted window, at a blurry shadow behind the shades that might've been Sam. Once, he went to the nearest bar and he got himself drunk enough to actually knock on the door. Sam pulled him in like he was afraid someone would see. It was a weekend and Sam's roommate was local, visiting his folks, so they fucked for two days before Sam made him leave. They fought and Dean stormed out; they both

knew it was easier than saying goodbye.

When he circles around to the same building this time, it's just he same. The dorm across the street is just a mountain of rubble, cracks in the earth leading up to it, but Sam's is fine. Dean goes in, goes up to his brother's room, but there's no sign of Sam. Everything on his brother's side of the room is pathetically neat, the books lined up to the desk at ninety-degree angles, the bed made up and the sheets military-tucked. Dean doesn't know whether he should feel proud or roll his eyes.

He wanders the campus, shards of terracotta tile crunching under his footsteps. He passes the twisted carcasses of twenty thousand bicycles resting against broken walls. The church is a heap of shattered mosaic and stained glass, with the cross broken off whole and laying on its side on the ground. The theology department would have a fit over the perfectly sad symbolism of it all if they were still around to see it.

Dean walks the whole campus twice, looking for Sam. He checks and rechecks every building he can find. Two very nearly collapse on top of him, so unsteady on their foundations. Sam is nowhere.

The student health center is still whole, but there are only two people inside. A beautiful blonde girl leans over her brother, who is dark haired and pale, burning with fever and wide-eyed with delirium.

"I knew him," she says, and Dean remembers her from a picture on Sam's wall. Rebecca, he thinks, and, *No, Dean, really, we're just friends*. "He left with this girl," she says, pressing a hand to the man's forehead, tilting his head up to force pills and water down his throat. "Saw them when they were leaving. They went to her parents' in Fresno. See if they're alive. Left a couple days ago, I think."

He thanks her, uneasy, but she doesn't look at him. Doesn't care.

"What was her name?" Dean asks. He gets only an up-down shrug of curved shoulders in return.

::

He stops in San Francisco for the night. He finds a hunter on Pier 39, a cute little blonde thing armed to the teeth. She watches him with narrowed eyes and doesn't turn her back once while they build their fire inside a thick ring of salt.

"It started here." She shrugs, hugging her knees, pulling at her jacket sleeves. It's cold, feeling more like the winter they left behind with the storm. "Figured I'd check it out." Over her shoulder, the broken pieces of Golden Gate hang suspended in the dark like a shipwreck, a tall-reaching mast and tattered sails draping the ruin. "What about you?"

Dean shrugs. "Looking for my brother. Sam."

The girl's eyebrows go up, just a bit. She leans carefully back onto her elbows. "What'd you say your name was?" she asks, like she just forgot that he didn't.

He grunts. "Dean. Winchester. Why?"

Her smile is brilliant. "Winchester? Shit. Wow."

Dean almost feels himself blush. He holds out a hand, awkward, and she squeezes it tight. Her fingers are cold.

"I'm Jo. John used to hunt with my dad, mom said. You guys are practically *legend*, you know?"

He does blush then, ducks his head and pokes at their little campfire with a stick to hide it. "Thanks, I guess."

When he looks back up, she's still studying him intently, like a kid at a rock concert, meeting a favorite celebrity. It's fucking *weird*, is all, and all Dean really wants at this exact second is to be drunk and warm. He wonders how hard it would be to break into one of the hotels. The Hyatt's just a few blocks away.

Jo talks more after she learns his name, feeling somehow safer in their perceived connection. Dean watches her hands move with her speech, watches the soft curve of her lips. He thinks about fucking her, maybe, just to give them something for the night, before they go separate ways at morning. They way she looks at him, how she twists and resettles her body every once in a while, he's pretty sure she wouldn't mind.

He's got half a dozen opening lines floating around in his head but instead he cuts her off mid-sentence and says, "We should sleep in shifts."

Jo blinks at him slowly, then nods. "Yeah, I guess. Makes sense. You want first?"

He shakes his head, and when she settles uneasily onto her side in a sleeping bag, he watches the slim curve of her spine, watches the waves blowing softly up off the ocean.

He doesn't think.

He doesn't wake her for a second shift at all, and he leaves at daybreak before she ever stirs, leaving a note under one of her guns. *Good luck*, he scribbles, and then takes off before he has to answer more questions, before he has to figure out something to do.

::

Dean doesn't find Sam in Fresno. He wanders the city like he should be able to, like in a city of what used to be half a million there's no way he'll go a block without catching sight of someone he knows.

He leaves the Chevy in an alley when the streets get too crowded with abandoned cars, goes on foot for hours, until the sky goes dark. He shouts for Sam, every few blocks, yells and hears it echo back to him out of the silence. It's unnerving, maddening. It isn't like nighttime, when the noise just goes lighter, softer and less constant. Now it's all disappeared. Sometimes a grate hisses up

steam, a dog barks and runs by, wild-eyed, rabid, but there are no people, and there are no bodies. He's alone.

There are wolves in the Tower District, snarling and wild. He's read somewhere that wolves won't attack unless provoked, but Dean isn't willing to push his luck. He moves slow, sticks to the shadows. He's sure he's seen this shit in a movie somewhere; that thought isn't really comforting. Mostly it just pisses him off that they've been reduced to this: cheap ploys drawn from the pages of ten-cent comics.

He sleeps just inside the doorways of the more stable buildings, still not comfortable with the idea of holing up in someone's house for the night, even if they won't come back at him with a baseball bat for invading their space.

Five days later, half-mad with the silence, he goes back to his car. There's a new dent in the roof, four long scratches in the paint, like claws.

"Fuck," he mutters, and he almost jumps at the sound of his own voice, scratchy and old. He gets in and slams the door behind him, shoves the keys in the ignition.

He's at the city limits before he realizes he's got nowhere to go.

::

The ghosts come after him just outside El Paso. He thinks he's dreaming at first, or seeing things. He's driving late at night, the moon a sliver, blurred through the dirty clouds, and he sees her at the last moment, a girl by the bend in the road.

Pretty and rail-thin, lank brown hair trailing down her back. He knows her: sweet little Tracey Jane, the girl who lived next door when they were in Roswell, who drove him wild with her pearls and pleated skirts and careful make-up. The first girl he might have loved, the first girl he fucked, who looked like the perfect picture of debauchery and sin spread out sweaty and wanting in his bed.

They left in a rush in the middle of the night, child services threatening at their door after he and Sam showed up to school with one bruise too many after hunts, when the social workers should've been after Tracey's drunk of a dad instead. They left at three in the morning, drove for hours until the sun was up to high noon and the Texas border was long behind them. He never saw her again.

Dean slams on the breaks but she's gone when he looks back. He steadies his hands on the wheel, takes a deep breath. The car stalls out on him and falls silent with a noise like a sigh.

"Shit," he mutters. He jams his foot down on the clutch and turns the ignition. The Impala shudders to life groggily. He checks his blind spot out of habit, and the girl is there, in the back seat, watching him quietly.

He swallows hard. "You can't be here," he says, and she tilts her head to the side, questioning. She's older, grown just like she would've, but not enough to have died last month. Dean clears his throat. "What happened to you?"

She sits up in the back when he eases onto the road again, leaning forward over the seat. Her fingers flicker on the vinyl. She moves in stop-motion. He blinks and she's got her lips by his ear. He can feel them move, can feel her breath, but he can't hear what she says.

"What?"

When he turns to look back at her, the backseat is empty.

::

He stops in West Texas to spend the night. No cars, no people, and it's eerie even though he's pretty sure this was the middle of nowhere long before bridges started falling for no reason at all. He builds a fire, builds a circle in salt, sits hunched over the rocks poking at the embers with a stick. The gun is heavy in his jeans,

the waist already loose with not enough to eat, with not enough sleep, and it's only been a few weeks.

The stars are different, now, moving faster across the sky, scattering and running, or maybe it's just his head spinning. He thinks, vaguely, it's just like normal. Just like always: no ground to go to, to hold to.

He jerks awake in the night to the sound of a train, and he runs the mile to the tracks with his lungs burning and blood in the back of his throat, runs until he almost trips over the rails running empty through the dirt. The whistle blows, loud and demanding, like it's right beside him, and the wind pushes past like rattling cars. When he puts out his hand, there's nothing but heavy air.

I'm sorry, he whispers aloud, kneels down by the cold scar of the tracks. *I'm so sorry*, and when he hangs his head, the whip of the ghost-cars ruffles his hair like autumn, brushes past indifferently.

Miles off, the whistle sounds again.

::

In Louisiana, he meets his mother.

The heater spits and hisses, struggling against the cold, even though yesterday was dewy spring, and maybe it's just things settling before they can be fully new, before they can adjust. Dean's driving in the dark with his eyes slipping shut, shivering under his jacket, and he's thinking about digging in the trunk for a drink when she looms up in front of his headlights, alabaster-pale and gorgeous, gold spilling over her shoulders and her nightgown fluttering in an imaginary breeze.

He swerves and hits the guardrail, hits the low hill behind it. When he comes to, he's three songs later in the tape, and there's a warm hand on his forehead, brushing along his hairline.

"You should be more careful," she says, cups his cheek. "It isn't safe."

"S'late," he mumbles, disoriented, and she laughs, gentle and sympathetic.

"I know, baby. But you've got to try, okay? You'll find them."

He nods, and a dull pain throbs in his skull and behind his eyes. "Yeah," he agrees, and bows his head into her touch. And then —"Them?"

She kisses the top of his head, moves off with a rustle of cloth and the faint brush of her perfume. "Eventually," she says, and, "It all fits into place. You'll see." And when he opens his eyes, she's gone, just empty space in the seat beside him.

The radio plays on.

imagine the houses, part 3

Three.

They've grown pale underground. Stilted, watery, unsure in the sun. They put out their arms for balance going down the library steps.

Jess shades her eyes with one hand. She touches Sam's sleeve. "I don't see any bodies. They can't all be alive, can they?" She's right. There are no dead, just empty space where they should be.

"I don't know," he says, looking out at the crumbled sidewalks and the caved-in roofs. It's true.

Behind them, Mel clears her throat. "So. Where're you all gonna go, now?"

"My parents are in Fresno," Jess says. "Steal a car, I guess. See if they're okay."

"We're going East," Luke says, and Mel smiles at him, threads her hand through his. Jess's smile splits wide open, and Laura makes a squealing noise, and claps her hands together.

"I *knew* it," she declares, triumphant, and Mel shrugs, a slight blush rising on her cheeks.

"Home's on the way. Guess we'll see what happens. Sam? What about you?"

He shoves his hands in his pockets. "I don't really keep in touch with my family," he says quietly. "Got no clue where they are now." He looks to Jess. "I could come with you. Anyway, you got any idea how to hotwire a car?"

She laughs. "You do?"

Sam doesn't answer. Miles breaks in, slaps him on the back. "Good luck, man. Thanks for. Y'know. Pretty sure you were the only one

with a clear head when this shit started, and. Well." He shrugs.

"You would've been fine," Sam says, but the rest of them give him doubtful looks. Even the others, the two who hardly spoke at all, thank him quietly. The girl stands up on the tips of her toes to give him a hug before they all head in their separate directions.

"We might run into each other again," Luke says timidly. He pulls a crumpled bookstore receipt out of his pocket. He writes down the address and hands it over. "You don't find them, come on up, all right? We got plenty of room."

Sam thanks him, and so does Jess. They're turning to leave when Mel says, "Hey, guys, wait." They turn to look at her, and she smiles, big and sad. "Merry Christmas."

"Shit," Sam laughs, running through the math in his head. "Jesus, you're right. Merry Christmas."

Jess turns to him when they've all left, when they're walking down the worn steps alone. "You'll really come?" she asks. "Your brother, he might try to come here, and—"

Sam shakes his head. "I'll find him after," he says, sounding so sure of himself Jess doesn't question.

"I wasn't gonna ask," she mumbles, and Sam shrugs his shoulders.

"We don't know what's out there, Jess. You shouldn't be on your own. I'll find Dean after. I know where he's likely to go. I just need to grab some things before we leave. Where's your dorm?"

Their buildings are close, and they both look stable. They make plans to grab clothes and whatever else and meet in the middle in half an hour.

"Careful," Sam cautions, and Jess grins at him.

"You're starting to sound like my mother, Sam." Still, he can see the unease she's trying to hide.

"Thirty minutes," he says firmly, and she nods.

::

They never get to the middle. When Jess gets back down the steps, a bulky bag of clothes tossed over her shoulder, Sam's already waiting with an old red truck, his duffle sitting in the back.

"That was fast," Jess says, eyebrows raised, and Sam shrugs like it's nothing. He doesn't tell her he still keeps most of his stuff packed away in a bag in the back of his closet, just in case. It took him less than five minutes to grab anything else, and the truck was easy, left unlocked with the keys sitting in the ashtray. He stashed his gun in the glove box, his blades under the seats in their case, and he just stands there trying to look innocent while Jess circles the thing once and drops her bag in the back.

"Not all that fuel efficient," he admits, and she laughs. He bets her family all drive hybrids and buy organic foods, ask for paper bags every time. "But we'll need the space. We should hit up a grocery store before we go, stock up on food and water. And we've got somewhere to sleep if there are no hotels." He nods to the flatbed.

"You put a lot of thought into this," Jess says lightly, climbing into the passenger's seat.

Sam shrugs. "We went camping a lot when I was a kid."

It isn't exactly a lie.

::

The drive out is painful, passing by places they know and seeing them destroyed. People creep out of the ruins in a trickle, hesitant to leave their hiding spaces.

Jess makes Sam pull over and runs across the street to her freshman roommate, and they cling tearfully to each other while Sam stands awkwardly off to the side. He sees Becca when they

drive past the health center, sees Derek and Noah supporting each other down the steps of the chem building. They stop every time there's a familiar face, and everyone tells stories, everyone shares information. None of it amounts to anything they can use, but it makes them feel better, lighter, knowing none of it happened only to them.

Jess seems to know everybody they pass, and they stop so often it takes them three hours to make it off campus at all.

They stop at a Wal-Mart before they hit the highway. They raid it for water and soda and canned food, and Sam gathers first-aid supplies into a backpack while Jess grabs travel pillows and two sleeping bags off a shelf.

"You fit into these like a normal person, or are you too tall?" she calls to him from three aisles away. Without the musak or beeping cash registers, her voice echoes eerily. The whole store is dark; they had to force their way in through the automatic doors that wouldn't open.

"I think I'll be fine," Sam calls back, and he hears her laugh. It's a good sound, in the midst of all this.

They leave with more than they should, both of them uncomfortably aware of the fact as they walk past the row of cash registers. They have half a cart full of toiletries and razors, salt and food and supplies, even a stack of CDs from the entertainment center for the car. Loading everything up, Sam learns that she likes Bob Dylan, likes the Doors and Leonard Cohen and a dozen others he's never heard of. She's shocked when he says he's never really listened to any of them, never more than what he heard flipping past the occasional stray folk station in the middle of nowhere.

"My brother always picked the music," he says by way of explanation, but Jess just shakes her head and shoves a disc in the player.

"*Listen*," she orders, and he salutes before he starts the car again.

::

They drive without speaking, mostly, letting the music fill the space. Occasionally Jess turns the volume up or down, says something like, "I love this one," and Sam perks up and listens more closely. He feels almost like he's looking for clues to why, trying to figure her out and he feels guilty for it, when Jess is more and more just what she seems, open and beautiful and kind.

The highways are crowded, full of empty cars. Some of them were beaten almost flat with the falling rocks, some are burnt to bare metal skeletons. Others sit like they're parked, waiting for their owners to return. There are no bodies in any of them.

More often than not, he has to drive off the road, around the bumper-to-bumper lines. He imagines this when the people were still there, blaring horns and the smell of burning rubber, exhaust. He can hear children crying and their parents screaming, terrified. He thinks of Dean somewhere in the middle of all of it, and he prays to God his family's still alive. He should've done it sooner.

Jess sits quietly in the passenger seat, sometimes tapping her fingers along to a song, mumbling along to the lyrics. She stares out of the window and says, once, "Where are they?" The glass fogs against her lips and when she turns back to Sam, her eyes are wet. "Four hours and I haven't seen anybody."

The drive wouldn't take any more than that, usually, even with traffic, but four hours in and they've gone less than halfway. Outside, the sky starts to dim. The truck's clock says it's three in the afternoon.

Sam squints up from the dirt on the windshield. "We should stop," he says. "Who knows what's coming out at night."

Jess looks at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He gives her a strained smile. "Maybe I'm superstitious."

"Are you?"

He shrugs, slowly steering the car off the road and onto the exit ramp. They find an old motel that looks reasonably decent, and Sam picks the lock on one door while Jess hovers over his shoulder. He can almost see the questions bubbling up inside her when he pushes the door open and turns to give her a victorious grin, but she forces them down and steps past Sam and over the threshold.

It isn't the best place he's ever stayed, but it isn't the worse, and Jess looks perfectly comfortable. She drops her bag on the floor and her eyes light on the bathroom. "You think there's still running water?" she asks hopefully.

There is, but there's no heat. They rush through their showers, washing away the weeks of fear and sweat as best as they can, shivering and goosebumped. Sam lets Jess go first, and he draws careful lines of salt across the door and windows while she's in the bathroom. He hopes it's dark enough that she won't see.

He's laying out spare blankets and pillows on the floor when Jess comes out of the shower, already in pajamas and doing her best to towel her hair dry. "I can hardly wait for the frizz," she mutters sullenly, and then she looks up and sees what he's doing.

"Sam," she sighs, exasperated. "Don't be stupid. The bed's big enough for the two of us, and you've barely slept."

He looks up at her. "You haven't, either. Look, just take it, I'll be fine. I've slept in worse. I told you—camping."

She looks unimpressed. "I trust you not to grope me," she says flatly, and Sam thanks God she can't see him blush.

"Jess—"

"You're driving. I don't want you to get us both killed because you were too noble to share a bed, so you spent all night tossing and turning on the floor. It'd be pretty anticlimactic, don't you think?"

Sam's too tired to argue much past that, but he squeezes himself onto the smallest bit of the mattress he can fit on anyway. When he wakes a few hours later, Jess is pressed up beside him, her hair tickling his jaw. He doesn't think about it. He just goes back to sleep.

::

They leave when the sun comes up, around what should be four in the morning. Jess nods to the clock. "Maybe we shouldn't go by that," she says seriously, and Sam smiles.

"It might even out. We'll have to see. Come on; let's get you home."

He's seen *home*, seen it burning in his dreams. Seen a dark shape standing by and calmly watching, silhouette not moving to help while Jess goes still behind the flames. He's seen the house reduced to ash. But for now, for the next few hours, she can hope, and Sam can pray that for once, the dreams are wrong.

::

The house is standing when they get there, but it's empty.

"Mom?" Jess calls. "Dad?"

They have a dog, too, and she told him in the library how when she would come to visit, she never made it past the door on her feet, always knocked to the floor by a flurry of paws and cheerful yelps. Timidly, she calls, "Chester?"

There's a pained whimper from behind the couch. They circle around it and see him, a beautiful retriever lying with one paw over his face, blood matting his fur.

"Oh, God," she whispers, hurries around to him.

"Jess," Sam says quietly from behind her. "Don't touch. You don't

know what—he might be sick, or—"

She falls back on her knees, hands hovering uncertainly. "He's hurt. You think it's like the library? Like Allie and Evan and—"

"I don't know who would bother hurting him, otherwise." Sam hesitates, then holds out a hand to her. "C'mere." He lets her bury her face in his shirt, hugs her close. Behind them, Chester whines weakly. Jess sniffs.

"My parents," she says suddenly, breaking away. She shouts up the stairs, "Mom! Dad! I'm home!" There's no answer, but she bounds up the steps anyway, takes them two at a time. Sam follows tightly behind her, the gun from the glove box heavy in the back of his jeans. His fingers itch for it every time they round a corner or push open a door.

"Their cars are still here," Jess says, ignoring Sam as he tries to get her attention, tries to talk her down. "They've got to be here, somewhere. They're here. They have to be."

"Jess," he says, and she gives him a fierce look, annoyed.

"They've *got* to be here," she insists, turning on her heel to find a door they haven't opened yet.

Sam grabs her arm. "*Jess*. Stop. They're not—I'm sorry, but—"

She's crying freely, now, tears spilling down her cheeks. "We should—I should get back to Chester, see if I can—" She tries to tug away, but Sam holds fast.

"Wait. *Wait*." He lifts his head up. His fingers twitch on her wrist. "Do you—is that *gas*?"

Her mouth falls open. "Oh, God." She jerks away from him with more force than he knew she had in her. "*Mom! Dad*!" They've already checked her parents' bedroom but she heads for it again.

The fire sweeps up off the drapes the second she makes it inside

the door. It swallows the windows, charring the glass, and spreads out over the walls. Jess spins around in the middle of the room, a lost little child.

Sam ducks his head and runs for her, half-blind. He damn near carries her out the door, her fists beating his chest, trying to get away. She cries for her parents like a kid, squirms when Sam forces her down the stairs and out the front door. They collapse on the front lawn, throats burning with the heavy smoke. Jess tries to go back, tries to get away while Sam holds her down.

"Chester's still in there," she says. Her lip trembles. "He—"

Sam holds her tight. "You can't, Jess. He wouldn't… he wasn't going to make it. He was hurt, you saw. He'd probably been there for hours. Maybe even a day. There's nothing you could've done for him."

She nods slowly, dazed. "They just disappeared," she says slowly. "Like the people in the cars. All the bodies." She starts to shake, and he holds her tighter. "My mom and dad, I mean—they're dead."

"I'm sorry," Sam whispers, and he is. He wants her to have that life, wants the world to spin backwards and put this right, give this girl her family, her dog, her home. He wants them cramming for finals without the pall of fallen bridges and burnt bodies. He wants them to bump into each other in the library stacks, meeting for the first time. He can picture it, picture them, young and happy and carefree, their only worries how to cram in an extra credit into their schedules, how to fit a party in between studying for exams. Normal.

They sit quietly for a long time, watching the house burn. It's one of those subdivision pre-contracted deals, slapped up in three months, all cardboard and fiberglass. It goes up like a kindling.

Watching the roof cave in, Jess shifts gently and Sam remembers his arms around her, awkwardly lets his hands fall away. "I want to come with you," Jess says, and she turns to look at him. "Try and

help you find your brother. There's not—I've got nothing here. My grandparents are dead and I haven't got any siblings or… I'll understand if you don't want me there, but if you're willing to—"

"It could be dangerous. I can't just put you in the middle of that. It wouldn't… If anything happens to you…"

She laughs bitterly. "I wouldn't have noticed the gas. I was too busy trying to… Look, Sam, that's twice you've saved my life where I wouldn't have done it myself. I'm feeling pretty good about you right now, you know?"

He smiles weakly. "I don't want you to get hurt."

Jess spreads her arms, as if to encompass the whole world. "Where am I going to go, that I'd be safer than with you? Sam, if you don't want me along, just tell me. But don't kid yourself, either. We saw what it was like, coming in. Wild dogs in the streets? There's nothing for me here. You wouldn't be taking me away from anything."

He bites at the inside of his cheek. "Maybe we can find a town or something. Some place that's still standing. Somewhere you can stay." *You deserve better*. It aches knowing they might not find *better* for a good long while. That it might not exist anymore.

She gives him a look. "Maybe. If we come across it. But you came here for me, and now we're going after your family, okay?"

Sam nods uncertainly, and Jess gets to her feet, strained enthusiasm and confidence in every line of her body. "Let's go, then," she says, and holds out a hand for him to take, like her hundred-pound weight can pull him up. He takes it anyway, pushes himself off the ground.

They walk slowly back to the truck with the house still burning behind them, heads bowed against the heat. Their shoulders bump more than once on the short walk up the drive.

::

That night, they camp out. The weather is springy again, enough that a single fire can keep them perfectly warm. They lay out their sleeping bags and Sam draws a careful circle of salt, giving them what he hopes is enough room to move around.

Jess watches him closely, and when he finally notices, she smiles. "Superstitious," she says. "Right. I got it." Sam's collar feels very tight, but he lets it go on that. He walks the line once to make sure it's solid, then carefully settles the salt back in his bag.

"You want something to eat?"

Jess tilts her head to the side. "We have canned beans," she says. "And beans. And, I think... yes! Beans."

Sam smiles sheepishly. "Sorry," he says. "When we picked it up, I'd hoped you'd be able to stay home. They last, and I don't really care."

She waves off his apologies. "Sam, I'm kidding. It's fine. We survived the end of the world. I don't think this is the time to be picky eaters."

"We haven't survived it yet," he warns her, and she shrugs.

"Done what we could for now. Anyway, I don't really think I can eat anything." Her expression softens a bit, and she looks ready to start crying again. She was quiet the entire ride, sniffling occasionally into her sleeve while Sam's gaze kept hovering off the road and to her.

"We should probably sleep, then," he says, and Jess nods, laying down in her sleeping bag without complaint.

"'Night," she says. Her breathing slows almost immediately, her exhausted frame finally fading into real rest.

Sam prods their fire idly with a stick. He's tired, but not sleepy. He sinks into his own thoughts instead, staring at the flames. He

wonders where Dean might go, and it makes him feel faintly ill that he can't even be sure of that now. He thinks of Dean's name on his caller ID, the phone ringing itself quiet on his nightstand.

He's kicking dirt onto the fading remains of their fire when Jess wakes up the next morning. She stretches and her spine pops loudly in two places. Her eyes fall on him and her mouth twists into a frown.

"Did you sleep at all last night?"

Sam shrugs. "Some," he lies lightly. He's trying to distract himself from sleep, anxious about what might come at them out of the dark. He made a list, too, scribbled down places Dean might go. It's woefully incomplete, just a few lines long, and all of it sheer speculation.

"Wouldn't the military have records or something?" Jess asks when he shows her. "I mean, I don't know how we'd get to them, but there must be a way to find out where your dad was based last."

Sam shakes his head. "It's not worth trying, I don't think. Wouldn't even know where to start." The truth is, he already knows where his dad was based last, and that was a bloodstained little corner of a Vietnamese jungle more than thirty years ago. "We have some family friends, though. People they might go to. Dad wasn't great at keeping up relationships, but some of them were still talking to us, last I checked."

She gives him a look like she's going to ask for more, but then it fades. She pats the spot on the sleeping bag beside her, beckoning for Sam to sit. "Okay. So this list, then."

"Right. In order of how likely, I guess." The names on the list are all but useless, and he knows it. He's willing to bet only a few of them survived, if any, and his intel is old. Dad could've pissed off a lot of people in the year and a half Sam was gone. But it gives him an excuse to follow Dean through the dreams, wherever they send them. He can only hope that they keep coming. Jess doesn't have to know.

Jess takes the paper from him, studies it like it'll tell her more than a handful of nicknames for people she's never met. "Okay," she says again, and folds it over, creases it neatly before handing it back. Sam gets to his feet and shoves it in his pocket, then offers a hand to help her up. "Okay. Who are we visiting first?"

::

He drives East because he doesn't know where to go. Jess sits beside him and plays the DJ. In between CDs, she tells him little tidbits, how this band got its name, who influenced them, the random things nobody ever really cares about. She tries over and over to explain why the Beatles are important but every song still sounds like mindlessly cheap pop to Sam, and near Kansas, she just throws up her hands and tells him he's hopeless. And that he has no soul. Still, she makes him stop at the next store they see and she raids the music section until she's got the White Album, *Revolver*, and *Help!* good and ready for the next hundred miles.

She says she can only hear him trash *Abbey Road* so many times before he makes her cry.

They check out a few places, Caleb's and King's and Jeff's. They zig-zag over the map and every time, all they find are the burnt foundations where houses used to be.

Jess nags Sam for hours, telling him to sleep, but when he does, it's only for the dreams. It doesn't matter, it's all useless anyway: little clips of this and that, Dean driving, Dean drinking, Dean sitting with a group of strangers around a fire, eating something out of a tin can with a spork.

It takes him two weeks to notice that it's only ever Dean, anymore. He refuses to wonder if he's zeroed in by himself, if he's somehow narrowed his focus just to his brother, or if it's just because there's no one else left to see.

::

There's a whole town in Wyoming, all but zapped back to 1625. Clothes all sewn up from patches of denim and dirty cotton, but looking like something out of the Scarlet Letter. Old family Bibles dug out of the rubble and set on empty shelves. The entire village built around a little church and a tiny little jail, bonnets and hand-tended farms and even a goddamn gallows. Jess almost gets lynched for wearing jeans when they drive through and stop to ask if they've heard news of anything, if anything's being done for communication, if there's still a government standing anywhere in the world.

In Oklahoma, they find a small community of survivors living out of unstable little cabins and tents, trying to carve out their new civilization. They're welcomed for the night, and the way the Elder says it makes it clear that they offer nothing further, with a cold smile and a firm handshake.

In Nevada, there's a town in the middle of the desert, one that was never built there. The place buzzes with its energy, suppressed and boiling over for decades.

Three girls skip rope on a corner: double dutch. There's a shop with black and white TVs and vacuum cleaners in the windows, adverts showing smiling housewives cleaning their houses in heels. Two streets over is an honest-to-god soda shop, and Sam and Jess exchange glances, raised eyebrows. Jess threads her fingers through his before they go in, blushing a little, but squeezing tight.

"I don't believe it," she says, stopping dead just inside the door. There's a jukebox pushed up against one wall (playing fucking "Mr. Sandman", of all things). The girls wear poodle skirts, the boys, letter jackets. Milkshakes and burgers and plastic red baskets of fries on every formica table.

"Get you kids anything?" says the man behind the counter, grinning brightly, almost knowing. He whips a pad and pencil out of his apron pocket. "Malt? Cheeseburgers? What'll it be, huh?"

Sam squeezes Jessica's hand. "Nothing, thanks," he says tightly,

nudges her back towards the door. "Come on," he says quietly, and she blinks up at him when they go back outside. He thinks to himself, *This is wrong. This is wrong. All wrong.*

"We haven't had anything but canned food in weeks," Jess says, gripping his wrist to make him stop. "Sam, what—"

"Persephone," he says, not looking at her, scanning the landscape over the top of her head. "Pomegranate seeds. Come on."

He tugs her along, and the music follows them. It grows louder as the colors grow brighter. Strangers' smiles stretch too wide as they look up from the sidewalks to tip their hats, sinister.

Sam rubs his forehead, dizzy. "Where'd we park the car?"

Jess bites her tongue. "I… I don't…" She's not sure she remembers what their car looks like.

They stumble, half-blindly. Main Street stretches ahead, farther than it should, into nothing under the brilliant blue of the sky, stretches into the desert like those drawings you do in middle school art classes, roads disappearing into the distance so you learn about perspective. Just like that, everything a picture of what perfect should be. Pleasantville.

"There," Jess says, pointing, and they take another step. Their limbs tremble, exhausted. The landscape ripples around them, like shaking off the cobwebs. The music stops. The ground stops spinning.

They slump against the truck together, panting. Slowly, Jess pushes herself up to sit on the edge of the flatbed, then lies down, throwing an arm over her eyes to keep out the sun.
"So it's not just the weather," she says. "It's places, too? What was that, something in the air? I couldn't even remember who I was for a second."

"Maybe an alternate reality. I dunno. Could've bled over when the storm happened."

"Alternate reality?" she sits up and gives him a doubtful look. "This isn't sci-fi, Sam."

He shrugs. "Scientists have been working on these theories for decades. Some people say it's possible. You never know. Hell, maybe it's magic." He says it lightly, like a joke, and Jess smiles weakly, but she doesn't laugh. Honestly, Sam isn't sure how far from reality that might be. Still—towns sprouting up out of nowhere? Malevolent soda jerks? Even compared to most of what he's seen, it seems a little bizarre.

"It looked like *Back to the Future* or something," Jess muses. "Just without the time machine and the creepy almost-incest."

Sam bends down, pretending to tie his shoe. His face is hot. "It's not *Back to the Future* without Doc Brown," he says, fighting off the guilty twist in his stomach. "'Sides." He peeks up through the mess of hair in his eyes. "The western one's the best anyway."

Jess snorts, incredulous. "You can't be serious."

"He has a Rube-Goldberg *ice maker*. They time travel with a *train*."

She grins at him. "Bullshit, Sam. You just think the schoolteacher's hot."

Well, okay. Maybe that was true, too. Sam makes a face at her. "Come on. Let's get going."

"You're changing the subject," Jess says, hopping down from the flatbed and circling back to the passenger seat. "Was it the square dancing scene that did it for you?"

Sam flips her off and pulls the driver's side door open. Jess doesn't stop smiling for the next ten miles.

::

They're near Denver when he gets the first vision. It builds slowly, like a storm you feel brewing all day before it finally hits and you have to hide inside. He thinks it's just a migraine. Jess drives, throwing him worried looks every few seconds.

"Kinda missing the point if you crash 'cause you're not looking where you're going," Sam says, and she sticks out her tongue.

"You want me to pull over?"

"No, m'fine. Just a headache is all."

It doubles him over in the seat when it sets in, pictures and sounds, pieces. He sees the Chevy, sees his brother swerve to avoid something in the road. He watches as the car slams free of the guardrails and runs off the road.

When it fades, they're parked on the gravelly shoulder. Jess is on her knees in the bench seat, trying to get his attention. Her hands on his shoulders, on his face, brushing back his sweaty bangs.

"Sam!" she yells, and he sucks in a breath.

"I'm fine," he says, and she flops back down against the seat.

"The hell you are. What happened?" He shakes his head, but it hurts to do even that. He winces and she grips his shoulder tighter. "Sam, talk to me. You aren't fine."

He forces his eyes open, the light stabbing. His eyes ache, and his head pounds. "Just a migraine," he mumbles. "S'all right, Jess. Get us back on the road, okay?"

She huffs quietly and settles back onto the driver's side of the bench. "You need to sleep more," she says, reaching for the keys. "Try to take a nap or something. I promise I'll try really hard not to get us killed while you're out, okay?"

Sam makes a noise, but even he's not sure what it's supposed to mean. Jess takes it as a yes, though, and she turns the radio down

to almost a whisper. It helps with the headache, a little. Sam shuts his eyes again, leaning back against the door. He tries to call the vision back, tries picking out the details, but there's nothing, just his brother's car on an empty road. He could be anywhere.

Reluctantly, Sam settles into sleep. The pain lingers; closing his eyes and rubbing his temples only takes the edge off a bit. He prays for the dreams anyway.

He wakes when he feels the car come to a stop. Jess shoots him a look, and she smiles gently. "Feeling better?" she asks, and he nods.

"Yeah. Where are we?"

Jess flicks her fingers at the fuel gage. "Middle of nowhere. Out of gas. Figured we might as well try the station. See if there's anything left."

They're parked beside the only pump in front of the shack of a convenience store. Sam eases the side door open. The trees and grass are all the scraggly brown color of winter, even though it feels like spring. He sheds his jacket.

"Are you sure you should be up?" Jess asks, uneasy.

"I'm feeling better. Just need to move around a bit. Here, let me get it."

The pump isn't dry yet. He's willing to bet nobody in this sad excuse for a town got much further than their basements. He fills the tank and their two plastic jugs, curses when it spills over and onto his hands.

"Hey," Jess says mildly, standing over him, and Sam looks up and smiles dimly.

"Sorry," he laughs, shaking his head, and he looks down, then back up when he feels her hand on his cheek. "What?"

She has to bend down to kiss him, her hair falling in their faces, getting in the way, and he's so shocked he barely moves until she pulls back. He sits there, his eyes wide, his body perfectly still. Jess bites her lip and says, "Sorry." She moves to hook her hair back behind her ear. It only falls back into place again.

"No, no, it's—it's okay," Sam says, nodding, sounding unsure of the words, but Jess doesn't seem to care. He holds his hands awkwardly to the sides when she bends to kiss him again, mumbles something about not wanting to stain her dress into her mouth.

They drive through still-burning fields the rest of the day, ashy husks of homes and lives, never-ending. Sam stares resolutely ahead, and Jess curls into his side, her head on his shoulder. She rests her hand on his knee, slim fingers a light weight through the denim.

"It's going to be okay," she promises later, as they roll across the border and into Kansas.

For the first time, Sam feels like he could believe it.

::

Asleep, Sam sees Dean taking food from a QuickMart, Dean sucking gas from a car with Texas plates. He sees his brother sleeping in nondescript motels or in empty fields with a fire burning and a bottle in his hand.

Sam watches as Dean passes out and demons come out of the woodwork, creeping past his wind-broken salt lines. One leans over him with the body of a beautiful woman, but her eyes burn red and her skin is the slick, black color of pitch. Leathery wings break the smooth lines of her shoulders and rustle when she bends down and brushes Dean's cheek with her finger, when she touches her slick mouth to his, laughing when he doesn't wake.

Sam sits up in bed with his shirt stuck to his spine, his head pounding. Jess kneels above him, her lower lip bloodless and white

between her teeth.

"It's just a dream," she tells him, says it over and over every night. He doesn't tell her she's wrong. Jess kisses his hairline and smoothes her hand down the side of his face. "Sam, he's okay. We'll find him."

Sam goes back to sleep and sees Dean bleeding from a gash across his torso, hunched over and blocking his own light, trying to stitch the skin together himself.

"They're just dreams," Jess says, again and again.

Sam doesn't know how to tell her.

::

In the south, there are spirits. Nothing specific, nothing dangerous, just echoes and whispers of things gone by.

A confederate soldier stands on a split sidewalk in Alabama and salutes as they pass, the front of his muddy grey uniform stained dark with black and red. In Savannah, they weave through the squares and children swarm the streets. Tiny, pale, and they stutter-stop and grab at the hem of Jess's skirt when Sam parks the car on the sidewalk and they go to raid a grocery store. Later, the children are waiting for them outside, all holding hands, eyes upturned and pleading, but not for anything they can give.

Outside the city limits, the truck stalls on the railroad tracks and the ghost of a whistle blows somewhere off to the east, the watery light of a long-dead locomotive speeding towards them, flattening pennies left behind on the tracks. They don't panic, too exhausted to bother. Sam coaxes the engine back to life, and tiny ghost hands push the car out of the way long before the spirit train thunders by.

"Ghosts," Jess mumbles sleepily into his shoulder. "Guess we should've figured by now they were real."

Sam pushes the car back into gear and doesn't say anything.

He wonders when it all became so familiar again.

::

In Memphis, there's the first new rain. Light, softly grey, like a promise, like a kiss. Paper-dry flowers bend their heads, and the windshield washes clean of dust and ash. They watch it melt away in streaks, the wipers whispering back and forth, clearing the horizon ahead.

Jess makes him stop the car, and jumps out as soon as it starts to slow. She runs laughing into a field of tired sunflowers, spinning with rain on her face, holding out her arms. The hem of her dress dances around her knees in the breeze, and she smiles at him, waiting by the side of the road, leaning back against their rusty stolen truck.

"No one's gonna take the car," she yells, beckoning with open hands.

There's something, he thinks as he goes toward her. Jess grabs his hand and they half-dance in the tall grass and misting rain, an awkward tumble-jumble of limbs, twisting elbows and slipping hands, vaguely choreographed over the bubble of her laugh.

"I bet it's all over," she says in his ear, looping her arms around him. "The rain, I mean. I bet it's starting everywhere in the world."

I love you, he thinks, stupid, stupid, and his hands are heavy on her bony hips. "All over?" he asks, playing along, smiling, and she nods, like yes, yes, definitely.

"All over," she declares.

They kiss in new rain, stand together until they're soaked from the light spray, until they're shivering and laughing into each others' smiles. Resting her head against his chest, Jess works a hand up under the hem of his shirt.

"Here," she says, and he looks at her with eyebrows raised, confused.

"Wha—"

She laughs, fantastically mad. "Come on." She grins, gripping wetly at his hand, pulling him, spiraling, into the grass. They run like children, like when he was a kid and he played hide-and-seek with his brother in Jim's overgrown pastures at Blue Earth. Jessica's hand slips loose and Sam follows the flowery twirl of the hem of her dress, runs with her until she decides to stop, until she falls to the damp ground with a giggle, reaching for his hand again to pull him down. She shoves up the hem of his shirt and works it over his head.

"Here," she says, kisses his cheek. She tugs his hand between her thighs and bites at his lip. "I want—"

They twist together under fresh rain clouds, under the cautious sun as it pushes through the clouds and heats the curve of Sam's bare back. The rain dries, leaves them with the slip-slide of sweat in the curved away-places, in the crook of Sam's neck and the bend of her knee, where his fingers hook and hold as he pushes, careful and slow, whispering endless words that mean nothing they haven't already said better, someway.

They go back to the car shyly holding hands, a damp grip of their fingers, like high school and lazy summers.

That night, Sam draws the salt around the truck and they sleep in the flatbed, still puddled with rain. The wet soaks through their clothes like a friendly touch in the heat, an attempt at relief.

"It's something," Jess says, watching the stars spin out of control. Sam nods, his arms around her waist as she sits back, leans into him, eyes on the heavens.

"Something," he says.

They nod off near morning. When they wake, it's snowing: covering them, dusty-white, their hair and lashes stiff with the frost.

::

In Arkansas, a vision seizes him while he's at the wheel. He jams his foot on the breaks and hears the wheels screech distantly, hears Jess calling his name, but the picture fills his head, Dean with a knife and spinning in circles, following the beating of wings and laughter, his jaw set hard. He's setting up camp just off the side of the road, and there's a sign, just out of the ring of the fire's light, the letters taunting Sam as the flames flicker this way and that while they catch, almost and not-quite lighting the words.

Dean hasn't had time to lay down the salt lines yet, and the wings beat, bearing down. Something swoops in and then there's just a flurry of movement and then a scream, and Dean comes away from the demon's body with his hands covered in black blood, knife clutched tightly in his white-knuckled hands. Black skin, a woman's shape: the wings fall still, and her body writhes for a moment, then stops. She's dead.

Dean doesn't waste time. Silently, he gathers his things, the unpacked rucksack and the knife, and he makes it his way back to the car. *Better on the move*, Dad used to tell them. *You can't set a base, you keep going*.

For one brief second, the road sign flashes into view, half-draped with leaves, and then Sam feels Jess's hands on his shoulders, trying to shake him out of it, trying to pull him back to the present.

"I'm fine," he says, willing the headache away. "Really, Jess, I'm okay."

She bites her tongue, eyes wide. "Are you sure?" And she's learned, now, enough not to press when he refuses to say anything. She eases slowly back into her seat. "Can you drive?" she asks uncertainly, and Sam nods.

"Yeah. It's gone." He touches his fingertips to his temples for a moment, and there's only a dull pulse of pain. Maybe it's just like an injury, he reasons. He just has to learn to work past it. He clings to the thought.

Jess doesn't look convinced, but she doesn't argue with him. Instead, she says, "Where are we going now?"

Sam pauses. He sets his hands back on the wheel, can almost feel the blood from Dean's hand slippery on his own. He closes his eyes for a moment, tries to call the sign back, tries to pick past the shadow of vines creeping over the letters. It's like trying to pull back the fragments of a fading dream, but he takes a deep breath, and nods once to nothing in particular.

"Sam?"

"Arizona," he says thickly. "Can you get the map?"

::

The first lock he picks is to a single. Sam pulls the door shut and moves on to the next without even thinking about it. Jess grabs his wrist.

"Sam?" She raises her eyebrows at him, and he takes a moment to catch on, then laughs uncomfortably.

"I didn't think you'd—" he starts, and Jess just rolls her eyes, stands up on her toes to kiss him.

"You thought it was just a one-time thing," she clarifies, and her fingers slide from his wrist and to the waist of his jeans instead. She tilts her head. "You know, it's up to you, but I'd rather it wasn't."

They haven't talked about what happened in Graceland. Sam wonders what it says about him that he just assumed she'd rather pretend it never happened. He remembers Dean brushing him off

day after day, ignoring him for almost a week after they—

"You want to?" he hears himself say, his voice oddly choked. And that's weird, too, because he's shy, sometimes, but he's never been shy about *this*. He's had girlfriends, had *Dean*, and he knows all the jokes about how it's always the quiet ones, but Jess…

She giggles. Honest-to-god *giggles*, and reaches behind herself with one hand, fumbling for the doorknob. Years of training and routine tells Sam they should stop, should lay down the salt lines and check the closets and bathroom before they get too comfortable, but Jess didn't grow up under John Winchester's orders. She drops her bag just inside the door and pushes Sam's duffle off his shoulder. Her fingers go under the hem of his shirt and her nails scrape lightly against his belly when she tries to tug it off.

"We should check—" Sam tries to say, but Jess is pulling him towards the bed and pulling her own shirt over her head, shoving the gauzy pink mist of her skirt down and off of her hips.

She bites at his lower lip, lets it slide through her teeth. "Stop worrying," she says. Her hand is small and warm against his lower back, and she presses up against him, tilts her head to kiss the underside of his jaw. "Come on, Sam. Relax for once."

Sam throws one last look towards the darkened bathroom door over the top of her head.

"Relax."

For once, he does.

imagine the houses, part 4

Four.

They see the smoke before they see the sign. Thin, dying wisps from a fire set the night before. They rise into the air from a dry, scrubby field by the side of the road. Briefly, Sam thinks the greater mystery is how Dean didn't set the whole damn state ablaze by accident.

"Is that a camp site?" Jess asks, trying to see over the tall grass. She points, her fingernail clicking against the windshield. "There."

They pull over just before the sign, nearly overgrown with kudzu. Jess picks at the leaves, gives him a look. "It doesn't grow this far west, does it?" Sam shrugs.

"Guess it does, now."

They push back the vines twisting into the wood, tendrils curling around its posts.

Echo, Arizona. Population 243. Home of Miss Arizona 1996.

And then, beneath all that: *Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Hebrews 13:2*.

There are tire tracks by the side of the road, mud tossed up where Dean left in a hurry. Jess stands staring at the empty field while Sam examines the dirt. She wanders, in past the grass to the charred gap from the fire.

"Sam," she says, and when he doesn't answer, she turns and calls, louder, "*Sam*, come here, look at this."

The demon's body is still there, not yet fully decomposed. Black flesh peels away from the bone. The blood is a thick, congealed mess, covering the grass where it pooled around the corpse. The face has caved in, and the wings are tattered like old cloth.

"What is it?" Jess asks, standing very still, and Sam can't believe he was this stupid, that he forgot it would still be here. Jess touches his arm. "Sam? What is it? I can tell—you've seen something like this before."

He shakes his head. "No. No, I haven't."

"You *have*. Damn it, Sam! Stop lying." She puts her hands on his shoulders, forces him to look at her. "Do you think Dean was here? That he did this?" She points at the demon. "What *is* that?"

Sam doesn't meet her eyes. He studies the melting-away shape instead, its flesh dripping into the earth. He swallows hard.

"You remember how I said I was an Eagle Scout?"

::

"Demons," Jess says slowly as they get back into the car.

"Yeah."

"Like, monsters."

"Yeah."

"And your dad used to catch them? Kill them?"

Sam nods tersely. The truck rumbles to life. "Hunt them, yeah."

Jess falls silent for a while, picking at her nails and looking out the window as they drive into town. The truck rounds the corner into the tiny little town square. She squints. "What is that? Up ahead?"

They pull closer, and Sam's stomach clenches as he realizes. Beside him, Jess grabs his arm, her nails biting into his skin through his worn sleeve. She whispers, "Oh, my God. Oh, Jesus, what could've—"

Population 243.

Two-hundred forty-three bodies sprawl out on the ground, bloodying the tiny brick plaza. The white columns of town hall are spattered red. Two-hundred forty-three men, women, children—parents who were killed covering their children's eyes, mothers who died with their babies in their arms. The mayor is slumped at the edge of the stage, his podium knocked to the ground.

They draw closer, and when Jess moves to open the door, Sam stops her with a hand on her wrist. He reaches past her to the glove box and takes the gun, and Jess's eyes go wide but she doesn't say anything. She walks closer than usual when they leave the truck, hovering by his side, bumping into him every time she stumbles. Neither of them are watching their feet.

The scent hits them when they get to the edge of the plaza, trekking through the bloody grass. Jess tugs the collar of her shirt up, presses it over her nose. Her eyes tear up. "God," she mumbles, muffled, and Sam wants to copy her, but instead, he kneels down by one body to examine the injuries. Dead, empty eyes follow their movements from the ground.

"Claws," he says quietly, and Jess looks at him sharply.

"What?"

He doesn't answer. The wind whistles through the square like a scream, a sharp sound that makes them both jump. Sam shakes his head, bends closer. "Fuck," Jess hears him whisper. She reaches hesitantly to touch his shoulder.

"Sam? Sam, talk to me."

He stands up slowly, shoves his hands in his pockets. "They've been here at least a day," he says heavily. He blinks down at the body at his feet, squints, like he's thinking. "Probably last night."

A wind picks up, sharp, like autumn. Jess shivers, tugs her thin coat tighter around herself. They left the motel this morning in

springtime. The big clock facing toward the square from town hall hits six o'clock. A bell rings, sounding deadly-loud in the stillness. Above them, the sun is deep gold, dipping low over the rooftops.

"We should get back in the car," Sam says quietly. "Get away from this place. We don't know how many there are."

"How many *what*? Goddamnit—"

"Jess, *please*." Sam isn't even looking at her, craning his neck and squinting in the setting sun, looking for something above them. "We'll talk later, just—we should leave. Now." Jess makes a frustrated noise beside him, but lets him drag her back to the truck.

They speed all the way out of town, the tired old engine too loud for them to hear the steady beat of heavy wings hovering just behind them all the way up to the city limits.

::

They don't talk in the car, the dead town too close behind them once they leave it. Two hours down the road, there's a farmhouse that doesn't belong. They stop for the night.

The ground all around it is dry, orange dust, but the place stands comfortably on the edge of the road, a peeling red barn rising up behind it. Sam takes as long as he can searching it, laying down the salt lines, lighting a fire in the grate. Jess sits hugging her knees on the sofa in the living room, watching, twitching at the smallest noises.

"The way you grew up," she says slowly when Sam finally joins her. "The hunting—whatever you called it. It doesn't explain everything."

"Nothing ever does, Jess."

She rolls her eyes at him. "That's not what I meant, and you know

it. Your brother was there, wasn't he? He just left before we showed up. How did you know?"

Sam sets the can of salt back in his duffle, avoiding her eyes. "I didn't. I don't."

Jess sighs, collapses into the sofa again. "Yes, you do. Or you think you do. What happened back there, Sam? What killed those people?"

He settles on the couch, leans against the arm opposite her. "Jess," he says quietly, willing her to stop. He shuts his eyes, rubs at his temples. No vision, not today, just a dull pulse. A real headache this time. "You don't want this world," he says. "The less you know, the better."

She's quiet for so long Sam thinks she might've fallen asleep. He opens his eyes to look, and she's just staring. Watching him close, her expression unreadable.

"It's not just your world anymore, Sam." She sits a little straighter. "It's like this for everyone now. For all of us. You and me and whoever's still out there. We all have to live here."

He feels cold, all of a sudden, despite the overpowering haze from the fireplace, despite the pile of pillows at his back. "I'm sorry," he says, and he's lost count, now, how many times he's told her.

Jess moves across the sofa. She drapes over him, pillows her head on his chest. Sam's arm settles comfortably into her waist.

"We'll talk tomorrow," she promises him, and Sam makes a noncommittal noise in his throat. He'll worry about that tomorrow. He kisses her forehead, lets his fingers tangle in her hair.

Sam closes his eyes and dreams in stupid, normal fantasies, dreams of falling asleep in front of a burbling television, cartons of carry-out Chinese on the coffee table, a stack of textbooks forgotten on the floor.

In the morning, he wakes feeling rested for the first time in months.

::

Jess nags at him for two weeks to teach her.

She brings it up every chance she can, every slip in the conversation. It even works its way into sex, once, and Sam has no idea how that happened unless the whole thing was just some elaborate scheme all along.

They almost die torching a vampire nest in Idaho. They don't go looking for it, no, just stumble over the pack terrorizing a tiny village two miles down the road, and, Jess reasons, "It's not like we can just pretend it isn't there."

They flop back on the grass, after, sweaty and dirty with ash. Jess rolls over onto her belly to look at Sam. "I thought you said vampires weren't real," she accuses.

"See?" he quips. "I don't know everything, either. Wouldn't be a good teacher anyway."

"Tomorrow," Jess says, ignoring him. "First thing. Teach me to shoot."

"What kind of California Democrat are you, Jess? Jesus."

"Yeah, well. Bush was winning reelection anyway."

::

He picks up a few shotguns the next time they pass by a standing farmhouse. In the empty pasture, far from anything but tin cans on a fencepost, he shows her how to hold the gun. He braces her against the kick.

It tugs at something inside him, watching the pride on her face when she hits the target. He remembers his father's hands over

his, modeling. He remembers Dean standing off the side, an almost hurt look as he watched Sam beaming whenever their father said something like praise.

"Good," he hears himself say, and, "Try this—like this," when he reaches around her, fixes her grip, her form.

She still asks too many questions. He's more careful, now, working around the visions. He's growing better at controlling them, less incapacitated when they come. Nights, when they sit at their fire or try to sleep in borrowed beds, he tries bringing them back, picking out details from the pictures. Nothing that can help, just meaningless pieces for practice. It gets easier.

He studies his brother in the same flashes, over and over, sees how much weight Dean's lost, how hollow he looks. Always drinking, staring dead-eyed into the road. He sees Dean hunting, sees him talking to a young woman and looking helplessly confused. Sam sees his brother in a dusty little cabin with a girl, both of them looking angry and tired as they fuck, and he feels a hot pulse of jealousy that must register on his face, because Jess blinks at him from across the fire and says, "Sam? Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I'm fine," and, "Okay: here's what you should know about werewolves."

He's gotten better at changing the subject, too.

::

They fall into a rhythm. Always driving somewhere, always another place he picks off an imaginary list in his head, making up names for people who don't exist. He follows the visions when he can, takes them in circles when he can't.

He teaches Jess like his father taught him. There's no use half-assing it when she already knows. He still doesn't talk about his brother, much, sure she'll hear the truth in his voice if he does, and he doesn't tell her about the dreams. If Jess wonders why his migraines are lessening, she never asks. More likely, she takes it

as a small blessing and goes on.

They run in the mornings, train weapons when they stop to stretch out by the side of the road, giving the truck a rest. She starts asking more questions about demons, ghosts, every legendary creature she's ever heard of. Sam takes it as a blessing, almost—the more time she spends asking if unicorns are real, the less time she's got to ask about his family.

Sam thinks his father would be proud, maybe. Angry for bringing someone into this, someone who doesn't need to be, but that they could agree on. He thinks about introducing Jess to his father someday, John quizzing her and then taking her out back to see what she can do with a shotgun, and he laughs aloud imagining the look on his father's face.

They spar in the evenings, draw their circle of salt wider and wider as they branch out. It only takes a few weeks before Jess starts yelling whenever he holds back, cuffing him upside the head and threatening to withhold sex if doesn't give it all he's got.

He loves her, and he realizes it at the strangest times—when she's asleep in the seat beside him, when she's coming at him with a blade, all but beaming when she nicks his make-shift body armor, pillows stolen from the last motel and roped around them with twine. He tells her after her first real hunt, a werewolf in West Virginia that's fallen out of sync with the moon. It knocks him out cold and he comes to an hour later with Jess at his side his, ordering him not to move his head or else she'll give him a real injury. The wolf is dead at his feet. "I love you," he says, hazy, darkness creeping into the edge of his vision.

"Yeah," Jess laughs, pillowing his head on her knees, examining the gash on his forehead in the beam from her flashlight. Sam squints against it, groans. It hurts his eyes, makes his head pound. She bends over him, kisses the wound. "You'd better."

For two months, they chase wild flashes of Dean across the country, stumble across new geography, towns and cities out of place. New York is trapped in 1860, stuck in a loop. Paris is

suddenly, really, *actually* in Texas, as dead as everywhere else but still overwhelmingly French. The ghosts glare at them, mumbling bitterly about *les americains*, echoing weirdly in the dark.

For two months, they learn the new landscape, learn each other.

"I love you," he tells her, over and over, and for two months, it's almost enough.

::

They pick up a hitchhiker in Iowa. Dylan, he says his name is, shaking Sam's hand awkwardly through the driver's side window before he throws his stuff in the back and hops in.

For one wild moment, from a distance, Sam thinks he missed this vision, that this is how he finds his brother: he's got the same underfed, whipcord build he's seen on Dean lately, the same arrogant hold to his shoulders. His hair is lighter, his face thinner, and he's a bit taller, but the resemblance is there. Sam keeps looking up at the rearview to see him reflected through the dirty glass, slumped in the truck bed, asleep.

Something deep inside him clenches tight. More than once, he catches Jess looking at him too closely, like she's trying to figure something out, but her expression twists into a tired smile and she looks away.

They build a fire that night, the three of them, and the pictures fill Sam's head in a rush, him and Jess and Dean sitting like this, together. No matter how much he wishes it was a real vision, he can't make it one, but he promises himself. He promises they'll have this, whether he sees it coming or not.

It takes three weeks to get to the deserted little corner of Wisconsin that Dylan claims is home. There's a new mountain range tearing up the border, no roads or passes. They get lost over and over, nearly crash and die more often than that. Sam tries not to count how many of those are just because he can't keep his eyes in front of him where they belong, shame hot on his

face when Jess slaps the back of his head lightly, teasing even when she's pale and carsick, making him pull over time and time again.

Home is a shack of a house in the middle of nowhere, muddy brown with the grey leaves hanging sickly from the trees. There's something about it that's achingly familiar, and Sam doesn't realize until after they're gone that it looks almost exactly like the place they had in Pennsylvania when he was fifteen years old, tired grey clearing and all.

Dylan doesn't ask them to help him check it out, and he just shakes his head when they offer. "I got it," he says, grins, and puts two fingers to his brow in a mock salute when they pull away. The gesture is painfully *Dean*, and Sam bites down on his own tongue, manages a tight nod back.

The truck rumbles off and around the bend in the road, trees blocking the view before they can see Dylan's shape fade into nothing halfway down the gravelly walk.

::

They find a standing hotel in Madison and stop to spend the night. Nicer than they've seen so far, maybe even fancy when it still had a staff. The bed is wide and solid, an elaborate frame made up to look like wrought iron. The sheets are clean, soft, with something resembling an actual thread count, and the mattress shifts with her when Jess drops back into it, swallowing her shape.

She groans, eyes slipping shut. "I'm never moving," she promises. "Never again."

It's been a hard few weeks. The truck isn't cut out for mountaineering any more than they are, and the drive was more than awkward, the radio busted and nothing to talk about. Jess spent most of her time retching into the bushes or watching Sam's face, the shadow of *want* etched into his features every time he glanced up at the rearview mirror. She wanted to ask, and almost did a hundred times, held herself back so the poor guy wouldn't

have to hear the question, probably uncomfortable enough sitting in the flatbed with all their luggage, freezing his ass off half the time under a pile of sleeping bags.

"Never," Sam repeats, and Jess absolutely refuses to open her eyes, but she can hear his smile in the word. "Never's a long time, Jess."

The mattress tips under his weight, and his fingers tease their way up her thigh, brush over the inseam of her jeans, then move to her zipper, working it down. Jess hums lightly, pleasantly heavy.

"Never," she repeats. "I'm going to sleep now. Really." She blinks one eye open, sees Sam look at her doubtfully. "Really," she says, nodding against the pillow.

"Really," he says, mimics her nod like he's considering letting her go, then decides against it. His fingers work their way under the waist of her underwear, press into the slick heat between her legs. Jess hears herself squeak, and Sam laughs, pushing her shirt up to bare her stomach. He kisses her belly and peels back her jeans, gets them down past her knees so she can kick them off.

There's been no time for this, for more than a month. First they were too tired, training and searching, looking for his brother, and then three weeks on the road with a stranger—no privacy at all.

They're both too eager, too worn-out to make it last, to make it any good, but it's still sex, and that's like pizza, right? Right. It isn't the physical so much, Jess thinks, watching Sam roll onto his back, chest heaving, eyes still closed. She feels a pang somewhere inside, brushes it away, but she still wants to know. Wants him to talk about it so they can get past it, go to sleep, and maybe spend the next week in bed. She's pretty sure they deserve it.

"Sam?" She nips at his earlobe, and he lets out a noise that's half a laugh, half a groan.

"Yeah?"

Jess shifts closer, dropping her arm across his chest, the guise of holding him down. "Who did he look like?"

She feels him tense, muscles bunching before he can force himself to relax so he can say, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Dylan." She kisses his shoulder, his cheek. She presses her mouth to the spot where his jawbone ends. "He reminded you of someone. Someone you cared about." She hesitates, unsure how to say it. "More than just a friend or family, but—someone you—"

Sam turns his head, pulls away from her just a bit. She falls silent. "No," he lies, and Jess sighs.

"It's okay," she promises. "I just want to know, Sam. It doesn't have to be a big deal."

He pulls away from her anyway, sliding out from under the grip of her hands. "I'm gonna check if the shower works," he mutters.

He leaves her there in the damp sheets, her eyes trailing him all the way to the bathroom.

::

Sam wakes the next morning and the bed is empty beside him. There's a moment of blind panic when he realizes he can't hear her in the bathroom, and he thinks, *this is when*. This is when he fucks it up. His eyes cast around frantically until they finally land on Jess's bag, still in the corner where she left it last night.

There's a note scribbled on a sheet of hotel stationery. The letters are curly, small and neat, perfectly straight across the page even where there are no lines. *Out back*.

The room has one of those plastic coffee makers where they give you everything, even the packs of sugar and plastic stirrers and lids if you want to take it with you, and there's enough power left to run it. He makes both cups and carries them carefully down the

stairs, their duffels crossed over his shoulders.

Jess is in the little park area out behind the motel, throwing knives at an old oak. Sam watches her for a minute or two, watches as the blades connect every time. It hits him again, that aching mix of pride and anger. She keeps telling him it's fine, not to worry, but it doesn't change how he feels about this, that he doesn't want this life to be hers.

Sam waits until she's run through the whole set of blades before he clears his throat to get her attention.

Jess turns, stops dead when she sees it. It's almost like it takes her a minute to recognize him, to acknowledge who he is, but then her eyes light up.

"Is that *coffee*?"

The noise she makes when he hands it over is a little pathetic, and he'll deny to his grave that he did the same thing when he took the first sip. The coffee isn't great. It's stale, been sitting in the room for a good six or seven months, now, untouched, and Sam's willing to bet it wasn't particularly good when it was fresh, either, but it doesn't matter. It's been too long for either of them to remember good coffee.

They sit on a picnic table drinking, burning their tongues. The taste turns from bitter to metallic. Overhead, the sky is darkening like it might rain.

"You never answered my question," Jess says quietly, swirling the last swallows in the styrofoam cup. She takes another sip, then laughs at herself. "I mean, you never do. But last night—I want you to answer that."

Sam drops his gaze to the ground, watching dead leaves skitter past them on the hard dirt. It was supposed to be summer. "It doesn't matter," he lies, and she snorts.

"Yeah, Sam. You nearly ran us off the road every five minutes

because it didn't bother you a bit. Don't you think you owe me this one?"

"Jess, please." The styrofoam cracks in his hand, and he drops the cup onto the ground. He waits for her to make a joke about littering, but it doesn't come. She sits silently, waits for him to answer.

The leaves still on the trees snap back and forth in the wind, angry. Somewhere behind him, there's a rumble of thunder. It burrows into his chest, shakes his heartbeat out of sync.

"It was a long time ago," Sam tries again, arguing with her silence.

Jess waits. She lays her hand across the back of his neck gently, warm from the coffee cup despite the rising wind.

Sam thinks of Dean, riding alone across the country, drinking himself to sleep, demons dancing in circles around him, giggling. He thinks of his brother keeping watch all night when they were kids, a gun in his ten-year-old hands because Dad was missing, again. Thinks of Dean patching his wounds, watching over him when he was sick. The press of his brother's hand to his forehead, checking his temperature, and the insistent press of his mouth when they fucked out anger, fear, every twisted, vile feeling swelling up inside them until it melted into dirty sheets, itchy skin, leaving behind the warm tangle of their own tired limbs, that heat that was the closest thing they knew to love.

"My brother," he says quietly, barely loud enough to hear over the wind. He doesn't look at her, can't.

Jess's determination falters. "You were—"

"Yeah." The first cold drops leak out of the clouds, break on the exposed skin at the back of his neck, slip between Jess's fingers when she lets her hand fall away.

Sam nods to the blades wedged in the tree. "We should get out of here," he says, and the storm rumbles its agreement.

He puts the knives away in their case carefully. They need to be sharpened. Dean would smack him if he could see how neglected their weapons are, and Sam argues silently with himself that it would've done no good to pull out their whole fucking arsenal in front of a stranger when they were lost in uncharted mountains, but the point is superficial at best.

"We should go," he says again, turning back to her. Jess looks uncertain, confused and hurt, and the shame weighs heavy in Sam's stomach, knowing he put that there. He can't blame her for asking, knows it's his own fault for letting her see—hell, for wanting it in the first place. It was never Dean's idea.

Tentatively, he holds out his hand, and Jess eyes him for a long moment before she takes it, resting her fingers in his like an agreement. They take their bags, trudge slowly back to the car. Overhead, the storm is pressing in closer, lightning splitting the horizon.

Jess mumbles something quietly, and it gets lost in a roll of thunder. She squeezes his hand.

"What?" Sam asks. She looks so small, suddenly, when she tugs her hand away from his and circles the truck to climb into the passenger seat.

"I'm pregnant," she says, and pulls the door open.

::

They pick up three different tests at the next gas station. Jess retreats to the bathroom.

Sam slumps against the wall outside, knocking his head against the cinderblock, hard. He can't believe how fucking stupid they've been. Careful, yeah, sure, whatever, but there's nothing else to blame this on. They could've done better.

He pictures Dean's face, when they find him and tell him—

because they will, they have to—and it almost makes him laugh. Dean'll rip him a new one, maybe even hit him. Sam's pretty sure he'll deserve whatever he gets, and then some.

"Jess?" he calls, and he hears her curse.

"Seven minutes. What the hell kind of number is that? Who comes up with this stuff?" The bathroom door swings open, and she drops heavily onto the floor beside him. "We have to wait," she mutters, and Sam nods uneasily.

"You okay?" he asks. The look she gives him is almost comical. Sam flushes. "Sorry."

He wavers for a moment, then puts his arm gently around her shoulders. After a pause, Jess reaches up and twists their fingers together.

"You should've told me," she says, staring at the floor. She rubs at a scuff mark on the linoleum with the toe of her sneaker. "You knew I wasn't going anywhere. Were you just hoping I wouldn't figure it out when I met him?"

"Didn't really think about it," he lies. "Didn't want to."

The first few months away were the worst, when he had to get used to life without Dean always there, pressing into Sam's space every minute of every day, suffocating. Sam missed him so much it hurt, missed Dean's stupid jokes and his terrible cooking, missed the crazy rush he got every time Dean looked at him, anger and love and lust all mixed into one. It was exhausting, he remembers, both of them working so hard to hold things in place when it was so easy tearing them apart. It honestly surprised Sam when he left and found people who made him happy without breaking his heart, people he could love without feeling tangled and shredded inside.

He's spent too many hours since he and Jess set out wondering how he could ever reconcile the two. He doesn't want to think about having to choose, having to push his brother back when

they finally find each other, but now, especially *now*—

"Tell me about him," Jess says, her voice almost gentle.

Sam's watch beeps.

"Seven minutes," he says, and Jess's hand tightens in his for just a moment before she pulls away and stumbles to her feet. Sam follows, standing in the bathroom door when Jess brings the sticks to the door to get at them in the light.

He doesn't even see, her hair falling in the way and blocking his vision, but he hears her sniff, sees her shoulders tremble.

"Why the fuck is it a happy face?" she demands angrily, holding it up for him. "People are stupid."

Sam hovers, uncertain. "You sure it's not a false positive or whatever? There's a chance of that, right?"

"Three times?" She shakes her head, tosses the test in the general direction of the trashcan, as if it makes a difference. She looks up at him, eyes wet. "Now what?"

He hasn't got a fucking clue.

::

Jess doesn't let him stop her training. She still runs with him, the miles that used to leave her a heap of tired limbs flicking by more and more easily as time goes on.

"Maybe you shouldn't—" Sam tries to say, and she looks murderous.

"It's *healthy*," she spits out at him, and he doesn't broach the subject again.

It isn't much different, for a while. Jess still asks questions, Sam still avoids answers as long as he can. She doesn't ask about Dean

anymore, doesn't pry into his childhood and try to analyze every thought in his head. Maybe she knows everything she needs to, now.

The visions still guide where they're going, even if Jess doesn't know it. It's the one secret he has left to keep, and he's not sure he'll still have her around if she finds out. He can't explain the fire in Fresno, doesn't know if she'd give him a chance to say he didn't know about any of the rest, after all this. He can't tell her that her burning home had nothing to do with the pictures in his head, not when he doesn't even know himself, and if he voices that concern aloud, he isn't sure he can make himself follow wherever they send him anymore.

They ran through his feeble list of names months ago, ran out of excuses, but their direction is one thing she doesn't question. They have a few near misses, find signs of his brother—the burnt circle of a fire, an empty bottle left in the dirt—and Sam is grateful enough not to need explanations.

They barely talk, and he misses the mindless arguments and chatter more than he'd have thought, stupid things like what Chinatown restaurant had the best food when San Francisco was still whole, whether or not the Harry Potter books were really as good as people claimed. Sam could never get past how *wrong* all the magic was, the folklore and the creatures, and Jess would get annoyed all over again because he still wasn't telling much more than *My dad hunted demons and never made it home in time for dinner*.

Jess still picks the music, stops him at a tiny record store somewhere in Virginia and expands their collection three-fold. She starts in on a diet of indie pop that almost makes Sam drive them off a bridge more than once. He'd be justified, he's sure.

::

The visions lead them to Virginia Beach. They walk a maze of touristy crab shacks, gift shops, beach houses collapsed into the surf. The boardwalk is nothing but splinters sunken in the sand.

"You spend a lot of time here when you were kids?" Jess asks him, kneeling in the sand, letting it fall through her fingers. "I miss the beach," she admits. "You come here a lot of summers?"

Sam shakes his head. "No. Not really." He tries to make his laugh sound sheepish. "Getting kind of desperate, you know? I don't know where he could be. We might've come here once or twice. Don't even remember the guy's name, who we stayed with."

Jess nods, but she isn't really listening. Sam can't really blame her; it's rare anything real ever comes out of his mouth anymore. It hurts that she can tell, even more that she's gotten used to it, accepting the gaping holes in his story because it's easier that way.

"I always had this idea," Jess says slowly, picking through the sand, fishing out a seashell and holding it between her fingers. "This idea about taking my kids to the beach, someday." She smiles bitterly. "One of those random fantasies you have your whole life, you know? Where you plan out just what you're gonna do and how you're gonna do it, how much fun you'll have. They made the cutest swimsuits for little girls. I was always kind of jealous."

It isn't cold, but something slick and uncomfortable snakes down Sam's back under his jacket, chilling him. He had those fantasies about his life after hunting, college and law school, a career and a family that didn't need bullets and salt to keep themselves safe. He shoves his hands in his pockets. "I'm sorry," he says and Jess shrugs.

"It's not your fault." She tilts her head to look at him against the backdrop of white-grey clouds. "You couldn't have seen this coming, right?"

His stomach drops. She doesn't know, she can't *know*—but the way she looks at him makes him squirm anyway. He has nothing to feel guilty about here, at least. He didn't see this, the world ripping apart at its seams. He didn't see them, here, hurting each

other in all these stupid ways. All he's gotten for months is Dean, seen more of his brother in those flashes than he's seen in real life for almost two years.

"Right," he agrees. "No one could've."

He holds out one hand to help her up, and Jess takes it, sand on her fingers gritty against his. She tips up on her toes and kisses him for the first time since Wisconsin.

"Okay," she says. They walk back to the truck hand-in-hand.

::

They end up parking the truck on the beach, burning their fire from pieces of salt-weathered walls right there on the sand. The ocean hisses, spits, like it's angry at them for being there, for disturbing the foggy peace of the empty coast.

"How long?" Sam asks, hugging Jess closer against his chest. It occurs to him that he doesn't actually know, that they haven't talked enough to plan anything beyond where they were going to sleep at night since she told him. Jess tips her head back on his shoulder, and Sam touches her belly though her shirt. She shivers away, ticklish, giggling despite herself. "The baby. When did—"

"Second month, when I told you. Up to about three and a half, now. At first I thought I was just late, or that it was from malnutrition or something. Except now I'm getting fat. Denial was awesome." She sighs, sinks her full weight back. He hugs her waist. "The hell are we going to do? A baby in all this?"

Sam trails his fingers through her hair, imagines what she'll be as a mother, with her belly full, with her shape softer, growing heavy with new life. "It'll be okay," he promises. He doesn't remind her that his childhood wasn't too far from this, his formative years spent kicking the back of his brother's seat while they drove from coast to coast. He doubts it would reassure her, that she'd agree that he turned out perfectly fine regardless. They haven't talked about Dean beyond places to look for him, and Sam knows he

can't expect Jess to be comfortable with the idea—definitely not right away.

Strangely, it does feel okay. Here, like this, holding her—even with the world gone mad around them, his family lost and wandering, he feels oddly at peace. Jess shifts again, but just to get closer.

"Tell me about your first hunt."

Sam laughs; he can't help it. "Dean heard dad talking to our neighbor about the sock-eating monster in the dryer at the laundromat. You know how you never get back all the pairs you put in, right? There's always gotta be at least one missing." He pauses for dramatic effect. "We thought we'd do the community a favor. We, um. We went in looking for it."

Jess chokes back her laugh. "Daring. Dangerous, even," she says, trying to keep her voice serious. "What happened?"

"I got stuck. Fuckin' thing really was possessed, I swear. It turned on with the door open and everything."

"Did you go back and try to exorcise it?"

"Nah. I'm pretty sure Dad's yelling scared it away first."

::

They sleep together in a pile of blankets, warm even when the temperatures drop for the night, when the cool breeze comes off the water and tries to snake its way between them. They drop off together, sleep easily for the first time in weeks. It shouldn't feel safe, Sam knows, being this vulnerable, this exposed. Dad would kill him if he saw the spot, no wall to put their backs to, wind that could sweep up their salt lines any minute.

Sam settles into sleep not caring, comforted by the knowledge that Dean hasn't done much better, lately. Not from what he's seen. It's a petty sort of victory, thinking, *yeah, well, he's fucking up* ***too***, but he doesn't dwell on what that says about his maturity

level, particularly when he's seen his brother almost killed a hundred different times by now. Every vision, every dream is a relief, even when there's nothing to guide him further. Every glimpse of his brother is an assurance that he's still alive.

He dreams that night of Jim's farm, the church standing on the far end of the property closest to the clump of buildings they called a town. They slept in its basement too many nights to count as children, back when their father still believed in some sort of holy sanctuary, when he still thought evil could be dispelled by the will of God. Later, it was the guest room in Jim's farm house, the will of God replaced with holy water in glasses by their cots, by Dean sitting quietly in a rocking chair with a gun while Sam slept in the bed farthest from the door.

He sees it now, the same buildings, Dean walking up the steps of the wide front porch. He sees Dean knock, ring the bell, wait. Sees him inside, calling out for Jim, for anybody, gun drawn, stopping at the door to that tiny guest room, staring in at those same two cots, still where they were ten years ago, haven't moved an inch. He sees Dean sit down, put his face in his hands, and he sees the building go up in flames around him.

Sam wakes up gasping for air, clawing at nothing in front of him. "We have to go," he tells Jess, and he doesn't know what he looks like that she shrinks away, terrified, and simply nods. He'll make it up to her after, somehow.

They leave the beach in a flurry of sand under the tires five minutes later. They don't even put out the fire when they go.

imagine the houses, part 5

Five.

When they were children, there were too many stories to remember. Their father's journal, their collection, grew thicker with every passing year, their demon and all the rest made ink and sweat on its crumpling pages.

They were never told this story, never heard talk of a desolate country filled with splintered times, mismatched places. There are witch hunts in New England and armed survivalists in the brand-new foothills of Florida. There's a jungle covering half of Wyoming with the echoes of landmines and gunfire. Heard tell there's a pine forest breaking through what used to be the smooth, dry stretch of Kansas.

In New Orleans, Dean wades through standing water up to his knees to the swollen steps of Red's cabin. The kitchen table's been upended and carved out like with a knife or a key: *PANTRY*, it says in angry scrapes that could be his father's hand. The curling linoleum cracks like dried leaves under his boots when he goes to the cupboards, when he sweeps aside cans of beans and fruit, packs of jerky and a cardboard case of Winstons.

Between two boxes of Lipton's is a bundle of spotted brown paper with Dean's name across it in red ink, and inside it is his father's journal, safe from the storm.

Dean goes to the garage and finds the cars still there, John's truck and Red's beat-to-shit coupe, as rusty as he remembers. He wanders the house for two hours, combs its three tiny rooms, prying up the floorboards with a crowbar like he's gonna find something else, some clue to where Dad's gone. He jumps at the smallest noises, like Red's gonna bust in any second and yell at him for fucking up the floors.

He fumbles for his phone. He keeps it in his pocket, still, like he'll wake up to the grid repaired and a ringing from inside his jacket. *No signal*, it reads, and he dials Sam's number anyway, like the damn thing's going to lie. It doesn't ring.

At twilight, he gives up on his cell. He sucks up the gas with a rubber hose and raids Dad's trunk for anything he can use, grabs any food and smokes and booze from the house. He drives out over the half-sunken bridge and back onto the highway, ignoring the shadows creeping up where there's no light to cast them.

He thinks how easy it would be to slight the wheel to the right, break free of the railings and crash into the swamp, but he doesn't think he could do that to his car. She's already taken too much.

::

He drives for days, passes dozen of towns and never sees a soul, just miles of abandoned cars trailing ahead of him like they're stuck on broken tracks.

In a dusty old cabin in West Virginia, he puts back two thirds of a bottle and a girl watches him from the corner. The first girl he didn't save, who died halfway through an exorcism, sweating blood onto her Disney Princess sheets. Eight years old with thin arms and legs, bones hollow-light like a bird's, with long blonde hair running down to the waist of her playground-scuffed jeans.

"It's not a test," she says, blinking at him through thick, black-framed glasses. "There's dancing, still. Up at town hall, they're having a hop." She giggles when she runs off, fades into old, solid pine as she chases an invisible kickball out of his sight.

::

He drives, helplessly lost in a country he thought he knew. Back and forth on the highways so often they were no different from the scars on his own body, familiar paths drawn over solid plains, cutting sharp and awkward at first, but mellowing, slowly, into part of the landscape. The roads were the only thing he could always know for sure.

Now, they're overgrown, highways broken to heaping rock, whole chunks of the world missing, replaced by pieces that he tells

himself over and over don't belong—a mountain, a forest, a great fucking lake drowning the Escalante desert. He wonders, sometimes, on the edge of drunkenness, if maybe it's him who's out of place, unbound and alone as he stumbles along the roadways, driving hundreds of miles alone, his father gone, his brother missing, the same old story retold in a new setting, just the geography a little new.

He raids liquor stores and drinks deeper, and in the mornings, sunlight stabbing into his muddled brain, he doesn't remember the thoughts at all.

::

In Georgia, he goes hunting. There's a little town full of desperate people, hungry for shining hope, hungry for God. They listen to a thin old man with a Bible tell them about damnation and sin, tell them that this is a test and they will be rewarded for their faith if they hold to it, strong, and Dean sits with them and half-listens, keeps throwing looks at the girl across the fire—the pastor's daughter, he later learns—who keeps biting her lip at him in a way that's supposed to be seductive.

The demons swoop down on them when the reading is over, cackling and beating wings, clawing at the peoples' throats. He shoots them full of silver, five bodies falling out of the air, and then he gives the people a fucking sermon of his own, tells them God won't save them if they don't save themselves. He stands tall, shaking on his own two legs, and talks into the night about creeping shadows that come out of the dark, about the purity of silver and salt and how it's a damn sight more useful than the holy blessing they see between a virgin's legs.

The girl comes to him, hours later, finds him sitting by the dying embers of the fire with a pistol resting on his thigh and a bottle from the trunk in his hand. She smiles at him, takes his arm and leads him back to her cabin, fucks him on the ratty mattress that lies frameless on the floor. She's tight and wet and she screams if he so much as touches her clit, if he rolls a nipple between his fingers, clawing at his back with her chipped nails, leaving red

welts, new lines in the landscape.

::

A month later he's on the other end of the country, a logging town in Oregon melted down to sea-level in the storm. He jerks awake by the dying shade of his fire, and he thinks he's seeing things, at first. He rubs his eyes and jumps, palm skittering out behind him to the edge of the circle, and the skin gets scraped bloody and dirty, but he won't notice until morning.

"Dad?" he says, and John smiles, waits. The same smile he saw on his mother, on the ghost girl from Charleston.

"You're not dead," Dean declares. He closes his eyes, shakes his head, and New Orleans comes back to him, dirty water soaking his clothes, itching at his skin.

"You remember the three billy goats gruff?" his father asks, dismissive. "Remember the troll? Fuckin' bridge fell on me." He shakes his head, flickering. Then, urgent, his voice rising: "Dean, listen. You've gotta listen now. It's going to be all right, son, but nothing's left. You're going to have to take care of them. You're going to have to watch over." He stands, and his boots shift the dust and Dean tries to stand with him, to go with him, but his father holds out a hand. "Find your brother," he says, like it's the easiest thing in the world. His eyes flash for a moment, dangerously bright. Hoarsely, he whispers, "Finish it."

He walks out of the circle, out of the pool of the fire's light, and he fades into the shadow. Dean slumps back onto the ground, his head spinning.

::

In Washington, there's a shapeshifter who tries passing as Sam.

Dean lets it fuck him, focuses on how it knows the exact tones of Sam's voice, how it cries out when Dean touches the same spots that drove his brother crazy. He shoots it, after, watches the light

go out of its eyes, and then he sits down with a bottle of Jim Beam and drinks until he passes out on the dirty floor.

In the morning, he's so sick he can barely stand, and the body's already melted to pieces, skin puddling on the bed, the stench unbelievable.

He retches on the carpet, rinses his mouth with tepid water from the bathroom sink and then swallows down a handful of aspirin and two bottles of water before he sets out driving again.

::

He's in Nevada again before he thinks about going back to Cora, and he's three miles from her little house in the middle of nowhere before he turns the wheel and goes the other way. He misses her, in whatever way you can miss someone you like well enough but don't love. He misses her and he'd like to see the kids, wants to see them happy, now, hopes they're doing better than they were before, adjusting to their losses. He tries and can't remember what day it is, how long ago he saw them last. He thinks a month, maybe a few, but it could be years, his loneliness stretching time out, as endless as the roadways and the sidewalks, running on in circles around the entire globe.

Dean dreams, sometimes, sees himself in her child-pink bedroom, her dusty rose sheets, but it's just a pretty picture, crayon art you slap up on the fridge for a day or two before you forget it's there and cover it up with notes about trips to the dentist or reminders to buy more milk and buckshot, clippings from the papers about dead people three hundred miles away because Dad said so, Dad said to keep the stuff that looked like it could be the next case once he gets back to town. There were always more scraps than there were nights spent at home.

Drunk in a empty warehouse in Louisville, hiding from a blizzard outside, Dean thinks about Cora and how going back would just be another promise he can't keep, teasing her with the idea that maybe he'd stay.

He tries to think about his brother instead, the last time he saw Sam, the last time he talked to him, the phone line staticy and his brother's voice appropriately mournful on the other end, probably just back from some tearful gathering where everyone held hands and talked about the inevitability of death, the tragedy of it, missed opportunities and how all those people crossing the bridge going to work will never kiss their kids again, never see another sunset, never see who fucks who next time on their favorite afternoon soap. Distantly, Dean's pretty sure he knows it's wrong to hate them for caring, but the broken ache in Sam's voice was more than he could stand, and it made it want to punch those sad, mourning people all to bloody pulp for putting it there.

Falling asleep with ice growing up on the walls of the storehouse, he never considers that maybe it was because of him, that maybe Sam was anxious after the year they hadn't talked, after the last time they'd just fucked and then fucked it up, like always, as usual, *again*. He never did have that sort of hold on Sam, he tells himself; he was never important enough to do that, to bring that hollow tone to his brother's voice himself.

::

Spinning wordlessly across the plains, cassette player blaring meaningless noise at him, he drives from South Dakota to North without even noticing, the landscape unchanging and road going on.

He sits at night with a cracked little mirror, an eye on his reflection while he shaves away his stubble out of habit, his grand daddy's straight razor kept sharp and polished ever since John gave it to him more than a decade ago and said, *There, son—it's yours if you can keep it*. The blade glitters in the firelight, tempting.

A pair of arms go around his waist, the barest touch of a spirit half-trying, and he can smell her perfume, her shampoo, and he feels sick when he sees her face reflected, because he doesn't remember her name, and before, he only ever pretended not to know when Sam asked, because it made it easier, somehow, if Sam thought he was the only one who ever mattered even that

much.

Soft pink mouth on the corner of his, on the roughly cut bone of his jaw. "They say it's impossible to cut your own throat."

He doesn't know what to say to that, his skin sweaty with the barely-there press of her all around. The blade slips in his hand, nicks the skin just below his chin, and he curses a blue streak into the empty plain. She giggles, *naughty naughty*, and presses her lips to his ear.

"It'll take time," she says, and the girls' choir melody of her voice wavers like Halloween wind. "It won't be quick, won't be right away, but the rain came back and the sun will, too." He can feel her there, weight stronger when she wills it to be, just there. Her hand rests on his inner thigh, solid as she pushes in close.

He licks his lips. "You're not here," he says, and she pouts, then turns it into a laugh.

"You aren't, either," she says. She sounds like it's a game, like flirting over shitty school lunches and their game of red-light, green-light in her bedroom after school.

He isn't sure it's not, anymore.

::

In Missouri, he goes looking for Cassie, half-formed *I told you so*s clouding his brain. The whole town of Cape Girardeau is missing, and he's sure for days he took a wrong turn until he finds one lonely, still-standing road sign heading the clean sweep of land ahead of it.

He goes to his knees before it, cries into the dirt. He yells at the empty nothing left of the world, and his own voice comes back to him over the earth and off the river, bouncing off invisible buildings and stones.

Dean goes back to the car with his head aching, his eyes red, and

he drives until he hits the next settlement somewhere near morning, where the people welcome him eagerly and ask for news from the outside.

He tells them, angry and tired. He tells them there isn't any.

::

In Iowa, he jerks out of a dream and finds a boy standing at his feet, arms behind his back while he tilts his head to look at Dean on the ground, unimpressed.

"You're too young to be out this late," he mutters, waves an arm at the kid. "Go back to your mommy. Get."

The boy ignores him, crouches down instead, draws with one finger in the dirt.

"Mama said to tell you," he says, tracing real lines in the dust. "Said to tell you we're leaving soon."

Dean glares at him, opens his mouth to say something angry, or to shoo the kid again, but the ghost shakes his little blond head and stands, wiping the dirt off his hands and onto his overalls.

"Mama said we're going, but you won't be all alone. You won't need us no more."

"I didn't fuckin—"

The boy fixes him with a stare. "Mama says you're not s'posed to cuss," he says, and scuffs at the dirt with his shoe, erasing whatever he traced onto the earth. "Mama said we're goin'," he says again, definite.

He turns sharply, like he can hear a call somewhere that Dean can't. "Comin'!" he shouts, and he waves his pudgy little hand in Dean's direction before he scampers, fading to a shadow, and then to even less.

::

Dean goes to Minnesota on a whim, wondering if Jim's church is still there, if the farm still looks like he remembers from when he was a kid.

They stayed here, most summers before Sam was old enough to hunt, Dean bitching because he wanted to help dad, but secretly, guiltily, he loved it, charged with taking care of Sam when his brother wasn't miserable trying to fit in at school, desperately trying to catch up with his homework. They played tag for hours, collapsed in rain-damp earth and dug their fists into it, hollered out their simple joy to the open heavens, let it echo out across the fields. Back then, it felt like freedom. Now, it's hopelessness.

The memories are sour in his gut, yellowed with the bad times he cut out and pasted over, trying to tell himself they had a time. There was a month, a week, a day he could point to and say, *here*. We were happy here.

He doesn't remember any more which parts are real, which parts he twisted around in his head to make them better. He only knows he wants, fiercely and blindly, that he wants his brother back and his father and his mother, the world like it was, because it was better than *this*. He wants a childhood, a drink, wants to put a gun to his head and put to rest the mindless empty task of being here, day after day.

He has his orders, he thinks to himself, and jams his foot on the gas and pushes the car as fast as it can go, broken houses and landscapes blurring to brown and grey, only the road ahead clear.

It's all he has, now. Dean follows his orders.

::

Sam finds him before he ever gets to the farm. Impossibly, like in a dream, he's waiting at the turn into Jim's white gate in a rusty red Ford pick-up. Dean's already got his hand on the gun,

accustomed by now to seeing what wanderers will do to each other, 'cause they're mostly like him, people with nothing to live for and nowhere to go, but too much pride to end it quick.

The door opens and Dean's squints, the gun heavy in his hand. He remembers the shapeshifter, remember a thousand dreams he's had just like this, always so real, so close, only they fade to smoke before he can touch Sam, punch him for leaving and kiss him because he's back, because he's alive.

This doesn't feel like a dream. Completely impossible, but the world is solid under his feet, and even from a distance, he knows it's Sam, can tell the real thing even after all this time, even after everything. He knows.

Sam shouts, one triumphant whoop as he jumps out of the truck and rushes to Dean, damn nears knocks him to his feet, squeezing the goddamned life out of him, and Dean mutters something about *Jesus, Sammy, get the fuck off me*, but he twists his fingers in Sam's shirt and doesn't let go.

Behind them, across the fields, smoke rises from Jim's farmhouse, but it doesn't matter. Sam holds him, mutters excited nonsense Dean can't discern through the relief in his voice, but mostly it sounds like, *I knew it, I knew we could, I missed you, I love you.*

Dean sees her over Sam's shoulder once she's already out of the car, watching them curiously, an almost-sad smile curving her mouth. She hesitates, takes small steps to come closer, and Sam breaks away when he feels Dean tense.

"It's okay," he says, face shining, and he gestures for the girl to come closer, his hand never leaving Dean's shoulder. "Dean, this is Jess—Jess, c'mere, it's okay, it's him, finally, really—" He's babbling, grinning like a loon, happier than Dean's ever seen him. Sam throws an arm over her shoulders.

Jess smiles at him nervously, sweetly, and Dean clenches his jaw and has to concentrate to keep himself from breaking her fingers when he shakes her hand.

imagine the houses, part 6

Six.

They end up in an abandoned motel two miles down the road. They pick the locks on two rooms and disappear inside, Sam's enthusiasm deflating like a punctured birthday balloon. Jess is uneasy, Dean is sullen, and Sam has no plan for what happens next.

He knocks on his brother's door just after dark. Dean opens it and stands there, shirtless, his jeans undone, a mostly-empty bottle swinging from one loose fist. There's a dent in the blankets where he's sprawled for the last few hours.

"Dean, come on," Sam says quietly, and Dean gives him a look, doesn't say anything. Sam shuts the door behind himself. "I haven't seen you what, a year and a half? And Jess was looking forward to meeting you and—"

"S'not my fault you left, Sammy." He drops back onto the bed heavily. He holds out the bottle between two fingers, offering. Sam takes it. "Twice." He laughs dimly. "That was really fucking stupid, dude. Where else was I gonna find your ass, huh?"

Sam bites his tongue. "I figured I could find you. Dean, I *did*, I—"

"Yeah, on a wild guess. Nice job, Sammy. Fuck." His laugh sounds like it hurts coming up, ripped out of him.

"Dean," Sam says carefully. "Dean, listen, okay? I gotta… I need to tell you something."

Dean makes a big show of straightening up, getting ready to be a good listener like they were taught in kindergarten. "Shoot," he says, and then waits.

Sam sighs, takes a swig from the bottle. He makes a face. It burns going down. "I've been having these dreams," he says when the liquor's settled. He hates straight tequila, Jesus God. "Since just

before this all started."

"Don't worry, Sammy. It's perfectly natural at your age," Dean cracks. He takes the bottle back with a fumbling hand. He smiles in a way that's supposed to be innocent.

"Fuck you," Sam mutters. "Man, listen to me, all right? I've been having dreams about… I'm *seeing things*. Things before they happen, when there's no way I could know they would."

"Bullshit, Sam, why would—"

"I dunno. But it's how we found you, Dean. What do you think the odds are we would've met up, otherwise? It's how I knew you were going to Jim's. I saw the farm burn down."

"Shit, man. You decided to trust random visions to help you find me?" Dean spreads his hands. "I'm feelin' the love."

Sam shakes his head, wary. "Jess," he says. "Something was going to go after her. Burnt her house, too—would've killed her. I had to save her, Dean."

Dean falls silent for a moment. Then, "And you brought her along?"

"She wanted to come. I couldn't just leave her—her family was dead. You've seen what the cities are like, right? Overrun. Wild animals, survivalists who—"

"Yeah. Fucking wolves clawed up my car in Fresno." Sam gives him a look, and Dean shrugs. "Found your friend Becca at Stanford. Said you'd left for Fresno with some chick."

Sam flushes a little. "She's not *some chick*, Dean. She's got a name."

Dean eyes him closely. "You fucking her, Sammy?"

"I love her," Sam grinds out.

Dean snorts. "I gotta tell you, dude, you're gonna be waiting a good long time if you're saving yourselves for marriage. Who knows when we're gonna find the next church? Hey, she know you fucked your brother?"

"She knows."

"Got something in common already, I guess. Awesome. And she let you in the same room with me, alone? Talk about trust. Girl must be a keeper."

Sam punches him. Hauls him up by one sweaty shoulder just to knock him down with one solid hit to the jaw. Staring up at him from the floor, eyes wide, Dean wipes a smear of blood from his lip. He holds up his palm and stares at it.

"Missed you too, Sammy," he says. He sighs, heavy, and Sam can see the fight leave him, drain out. For the first time he notices the deep shadows under his brother's eyes, the new bruises and scars standing out on his skin.

"Missed you," Dean says again, softer. He looks up. "Shit, Sammy, so much…"

Sam holds out a hand, pulls Dean to his feet when he takes it. "Sorry," he mumbles, and Dean sways for a moment, unsteady on his feet. He grabs Sam's arm, and when his eyes focus again, he's staring at Sam with a hungry look, and they're standing too close, both of them shaking with fading adrenaline and anger.

"Sammy," Dean says helplessly, and when he leans forward and presses his mouth to Sam's, it takes Sam a moment to come to his senses and stop him.

"Dean, we can't," he whispers, putting his hand on Dean's shoulder to push him away. His fingers twitch and for a moment he just holds on. Dean's skin is hot, damp with a thin sheen of sweat under Sam's palm. Sam bites down on his own tongue, trying to ignore the heat pooling in his belly, trying to ignore how

much he wants to push all moral and reason out of his head and just—

"We *can't*," he says again, louder. He pushes Dean back gently, steps away himself. "Jess," he says, and Dean's eyes narrow just a bit.

"Fuck her," he pants, stepping close again, reaching up to fist a hand in Sam's shirt. "Sammy, c'mon, just wanna—"

"*No*." Sam twists painfully out of his brother's grip, wishing numbly for his dick to calm the fuck down. "Dean, I can't, she's… I love her, man, and… She's pregnant. We're having a kid."

Dean freezes. He blinks at Sam slowly. "You stupid son of a bitch," he mumbles finally. "Jesus Christ, Sam, you don't even have to *pay* for condoms anymore—the fuck were you thinking? Anything else you wanna tell me? Anything else I should know, or are we all caught up? God *damnit*."

Sam doesn't answer. His cheeks are hot, embarrassed. "Be good to her," he says finally. "Be an asshole to me if you want, Dean. I don't care. But give Jess a chance, okay? You'll like her, man. She's smart. Pretty good with a shotgun by now." The corner of his mouth twists up slightly, but Dean's face stays blank. "She's been through enough, all right? Least you can do is be civil."

Dean shrugs his shoulders and nods, but Sam's not sure he's even listening.

"Dad's dead," he says suddenly. Sam's eyes go wide.

"What? Dean, wha—how can you be sure? I mean, it's a big country. He could be anywhere. Just 'cause you haven't found him yet doesn't mean—"

"He's dead, Sam. He was in New Orleans when this shit started. I got a text saying to find you. Drove over to Red's when I couldn't, and they weren't there. Cars left behind, and he left me his journal, but Dad was gone. I saw his fucking *ghost*."

"Fuck," Sam whispers. He's gone a little pale. "Man, I'm sorry, I—"

Dean shrugs. "Figured you should know is all. I made my peace with it, Sam. No one lives forever."

Sam opens and closes his mouth a few times. No words come out. Dean flops back down onto the bed, and the rusty mattress springs groan in protest. He picks up the Cuervo where the bottle fell into the blankets—only spilled a bit—and he lifts it to his lips. He holds it out, maybe a peace offering, and Sam shakes his head.

"I should get back to Jess," he says quietly, and shoves his hands in his pockets. He turns his hunched shoulders and makes his way to the door. "'Night, Dean," he mumbles, and Dean offers some grunt of acknowledgment.

He sits and stares at the closed door long after Sam is gone.

::

Dean wakes the next morning with a pounding headache, the tequila gone and the bottle balanced precariously in the loose crook of his elbow. There's a knock at the door that jerks him out of his sleep, and the bottle tumbles onto the worn carpet with a dull thunk and rolls under the bed.

"The fuck're you doing up at this hour, Sammy?" he mutters, pushing the door open, but it's not Sam on the other side.

Jess's cheeks color slightly, but she straightens up a little taller, almost as tall as him. She lifts her gaze to look him straight in the eye. Dean squints back.

"Bad time?" Jess asks dryly. She welcomes herself in, and Dean shuffles awkwardly to the side to let her, but he's sure to glower as he does it.

"Something you wanted?" he grinds out, and even his own voice makes the headache worse. He turns his back on her, stumbles to

his duffle bag at the far end of the room and starts digging around for clothes. His stomach lurches unpleasantly when he leans down too fast to get at the zipper.

Jess takes a deep breath. "I know this can't be easy for you," she says in a rush. It sounds like she's been holding it in since yesterday.

"Yeah?" he says over his shoulder. He doesn't look back. He hears Jess sigh. The bed creaks when she lowers herself onto the edge.

"I know you don't want me here," she says quietly. "And I know you didn't expect me and it's not fair. I get it. But we've got to… I don't know. For Sam, right? We need to work this out."

"Huh," Dean says. He pulls a pair of jeans from the bag, looking them over for noticeable stains or rips before shoving his own off, kicking them into a pile on the floor. "You thought this was the best time to talk about this?" He turns back to her. "M'not gonna remember half this conversation in a coupl'a hours." Jess is carefully looking away, a mildly disgusted look on her face. Dean grins. "I know, right? Hard to believe me n' Sammy are related sometimes."

"Put your pants back on," Jess says. She gets to her feet and she's got the door half open when she stops.

"I didn't ask Sam to leave Stanford without you, Dean. I'm not trying to steal him away from you or whatever."

"We're not fucking *dating*, Jess. He's my brother, not my boyfriend."

Jess flushes. She pulls the door shut again. "He told me," she says quietly, like there's someone around to hear it said aloud. "About —you know."

Dean snorts. He tugs a thin tee shirt over his head. "So, what? You're here for advice? Tips and tricks for the sack?" He gives her his dirtiest grin.

"No," she sighs. "Fuck this. We'll talk when you're sober."

"Wonder Sammy left me behind, huh?" Dean calls after her. The door slams, leaves him alone again.

::

They meet in the parking lot behind the hotel two hours later, all of them looking pale and tired in the white sunlight.

"The hell is this?" Dean mutters, waving an arm at the leafless trees, shivering in his coat. "S'posed to be getting round to summer, aren't we?"

Sam nods. "I though it'd settle. Like the days, you know? Daylight was fucked for a while, but this—I dunno. Maybe it's just 'cause we keep moving around. If we stay in one place, then—"

"There's nowhere to stay," Dean says quietly, and Sam bites his lip, looks at Jess. Dean sees, and shrugs. "Dunno where you think you're gonna raise a kid, man. Don't need me to tell you, right?"

"What about the towns?" Jess asks. She cuts through the lids on three cans of beans, hands them out. "I mean, not everyone's like us. We've seen people living in one place, settling."

Dean shrugs. "You want your kid to grow up surrounded by religious fanatics, go for it. S'like the fucking *Village* or something. Mostly religious nutjobs who think this is the goddamned Rapture, and all of 'em living together in these little parishes, lynching people they think're working with the demons."

"We ran into a few, yeah," Sam says, staring at the can in his hands. He prods at it with his spoon.

Dean grimaces into his canned bean breakfast. "S'not pretty. Already got run out of two of 'em."

Sam looks amused. "What, you tried to settle down with them?"

He snorts. "After information, Sammy. People pass through, going place to place. Rumor has it it's the parsons who really know what's going on. Nobody's too chatty, though. I don't think they really know anything anyway—there's no master plan to this shit. Just some fucked-in-the-head demigod who decided they were bored with the way things were. Time for a change. There's no fixing this."

Jess stares at her food. "Anywhere safe? Anywhere we can raise her?" She lays her palms over her still mostly-flat belly. Dean can see it, maybe, if he squints. Sam's expression softens, and his eyes go almost misty.

"You think it's a girl?" he says, hushed, like in a library or a church.

Jess nods, and scoops up another tin forkful of beans, smiling.

Dean clears his throat, breaks the moment. "No," he says, heavy, and Sam's head snaps up, remembering his brother's presence.

"What?"

"In answer to her question," Dean says stiffly. He sighs, spreading his hands. "There isn't anywhere good for a kid. Not that I've seen, at least. Have you?" He waits for an answer, then shrugs his shoulders when one doesn't come. "You shoulda been more careful, Sammy. That's all."

::

They pack all of their stuff into the Chevy, weapons and blankets, the food and water they loaded up when they stopped for the night in Kentucky.

"Where are we going?" Sam asks, and Dean shrugs. "Heard there was a place having trouble with demons a couple hours south of here. You see those flying sons of bitches? Fuck." He shakes his head, then nods to Jess. "You train her up yet?"

Sam's jaw works for a moment. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, but you really thing she should—"

"That isn't up to you, Sam," Jess says quietly, and he blushes, hotly red. "I'm fine." She stares him down for a minute, watches him squirm, then looks back to Dean. "You map it out?"

He tosses the map on the crumpled roof of the car. It hurts him to look at her like this, beat to breaking, and he promises for the hundredth time he'll fix her up soon. Soon. "We should get there before dark if there's nothing fucked up with the roads." The map is covered in his own markings, pencil and ink where he's scribbled the new things in, crossed cities off where they no longer exist. "Hell, you never know. We might end up in El Dorado or Miami or some crazy shit like that, for all I know. Gotta try, though."

It feels almost good, talking it out loud, like steps he learned to follow as a kid. Find a place, chart a course, kill the beast. Lather, rinse, repeat. It's better than working through it in his head, his only conversation for months at a time the chats he's had with ghosts trailing in his wake.

::

They settle into an uneasy pattern. There's not much to say, the three of them in the car together. Sam asks him about the past few months, what he's done, what he's seen, and Dean runs through it all in fifteen minutes, shines it up a bit so he gets laid more and drinks less, and he can see Jess rolling her eyes in the rearview. Pathetic, but it feels like he's winning something, and he smiles to himself.

Sam tells him about the places they went back to, looking. Tells him how Bobby's lot was abandoned, doors banging open in the wind, tells him how Caleb's burned to the ground and Old Joe Taylor's wasn't there at all, the whole damn house lifted up out of the earth, foundations and all. They tell back to the storm and no further, and Dean wonders how much Jess knows about Sam's leaving for school.

She looks at him, sometimes, like she's looking to figure something out. He's tried to be less of a bastard, mostly because Sam begged him, but he doesn't try too hard. He wonders what Jess thinks of him, if she thinks everything between him and Sam was Dean's fault, if she thinks he took advantage. He wonders if she thinks he drove Sam away. He tells himself he doesn't care, but it churns in the pit of his stomach constantly, poison.

Dean asks, once, when they're sitting around a campfire on a dusty corner of a South Dakota farm. Asks Sam about leaving, then, and Sam promises him, says, "Dean, Jesus, it wasn't *you*," but he stares at the ground when he does it.

"I asked you to come with me," he says, later, the next night, like he's just remembering. Dean remembers too, the two of them lying together in front of a fire like this in late July, staring up at the sky and dizzy with too much beer, with fucking. Dad was just a blip in the background, somewhere out-of-reach, a thousand miles away, and Sam asked him, his hand pressed hot to Dean's belly, sticky with come, *If I had to leave, would you go with me?*

And Dean hadn't understood, or maybe he had, maybe he'd noticed Sam was even bitchier than usual when college application deadlines had rolled around, even if he never mentioned what the dates were. Maybe he'd noticed the brilliant hope on Sam's eyes when April rolled around, the way he wandered around like he was dazed for almost a week. If they hadn't been sharing a bed, Dean would've dismissed it, assuming the kid just got his first blow job or something, fuckin' late bloomer that he was.

"I asked you," Sam says again, and Jess hums in her sleep, makes them both freeze for a moment, guilty for even remembering. She's showing, now, the curve to her belly growing rounder every day. They spent two hours in a maternity store in D.C., and Jess didn't care that the roof looked ready to cave in, more concerned with how absolutely everything was fluttery and stupidly pink. Even so, the new roundness looks good on her, suits her, even as her face has been thinner than it should the past few weeks,

sickly. She brushes Sam off whenever he asks, mumbles something about giving her space.

"You were drunk," Dean says quietly. "Might as well have asked for the fucking moon, Sammy, all the sense you were making."

Sam bites back the argument, tense, but he says, "You spend all that time trying to forget? Pretend we—"

"Fuck you," Dean hisses. "Fuck you, Sam, I didn't walk out and—"

Jess stirs again, and he breaks off. She makes a noise, almost pained, curling in on herself.

"Jess?" Sam's on his knees by her sleeping bag before Dean can blink. Sam's back and shoulders block his view, but he sees Sam's hand on Jess's arm, easing her awake, and he hears her whine softly, clutch at her rounded stomach. "Jess," Sam says again, blind panic this time, and Dean hesitates before taking a step closer.

"She okay?" he asks gruffly, and Jess shakes her head, mumbles something that should be, *fine, fine*, but her whole body is tense, twisted up trying to hide. Sam's shadow moves, and Dean catches sight of it, the dark patch staining the front of her skirt. "Sammy," he says roughly, and Sam nods, his face pale, even in the hot glow of the fire.

He lifts the fabric slowly. It clings to her thighs, sticky, and when Sam touches, when he holds up his hand to the light, his fingers are red.

::

In the morning, she promises them over and over that she's fine. Some blood is normal, it was just a few cramps, whatever. Dean's pretty sure she's lying, stretching the truth a little, but he can't stand that look on Sam's face any more than she can. And in the end, Jess *is* right: it wasn't that much blood, and she doesn't look much worse this morning than he's seen her so far.

"Dude," Dean says the third time Sam starts the argument over. He touches Sam's shoulder. "Leave her alone, man. Girl knows what's happening better than you do."

Jess looks at him, surprised, and then she smiles at him, genuinely grateful. He makes him uncomfortable, really, but Jess holds his eyes for a good long moment before she flicks her gaze back to Sam.

"Listen to your brother," she says, nodding, and she giggles at the scandalized look on Sam's face. She shakes her head. "Sam, I'm okay. Really. If something's really wrong, I'll tell you, I promise. I worked in a hospital, remember? I'm not completely clueless."

She says it like it means something, and Sam accepts it, worn down, but even Dean can guess that all Jess knows about prenatal care comes from television.

"Christ," he mutters. "I'll get you two a fucking baby book next time we see a Barnes and Noble, okay? Now let's get a move on; we've got work to do."

They don't, really. They're less hunters now than they are trained Samaritans with guns. Dean used to wonder how people did this job before the internet, and the reality is more unpleasant than he'd thought, driving endlessly from place to place, all but waiting for the screams to tell them where to go.

Jess nods, though, and gets to her feet, starts helping him pack their things. Sam doesn't look happy, less happy about Jess carrying her own things the whole twenty feet to the car. He makes up a bed of sorts, in the back, shoves pillows up against the door and lines the seat with blankets. Jess makes a face at him, then laughs, stands on her toes to kiss his cheek. "I'm *fine*," she says again, but she falls asleep barely five minutes after they turn back onto the main road, and Sam slumps against the bench seat, makes an exhausted sound.

"She's gonna be the death of me," he mutters, and Dean thinks to

himself for the millionth time how much easier their lives would be if it were just them, just him and Sam against the world. He doesn't say it, just shoves a tape in the player and waits until Sam nods off, too.

::

They're in the middle of nowhere when Sam gets sick.

A little cabin somewhere in Colorado, where they don't plan on staying any more than a day, but there's a working water pump, and it's a good enough spot for a few days rest, they think.

The fever knocks Sam out on his ass in about two hours flat. One minute, Dean's sitting by the grate prodding the fire to life and trying not to listen to the argument next door—Sammy too scared to get his girl off like she wants, even after she promises him again and again that it's fine, there's been no blood for over a week, on and on, a million things Dean doesn't want to hear—and the next he and Jess are running around in utter disarray looking for anything to lower the fever, aspirin and wet rags, forcing water down Sam's throat every five minutes.

Dean remembers Jamie burning in his own skin, and his gut twists uncomfortably as he remembers his broken promise to Cora, thinks of her struggling with the children, struggling to keep them all fed and safe, fighting to make sure they're still alive at the end of the day.

Jess collapses on the dusty sofa in front of the fireplace, hugging her knees around her growing belly. "God," she mumbles.

Dean grunts, his back turned to her. He rummages through the pantry, mostly spices and dried roots hanging from the back of the door. There's a dusty bottle of Jack shoved near the back, and he weighs it in his hand for a moment.

"He'll be fine," he says over his shoulder to Jess, and holds up the bottle so she can see it. "Think this is still good?"

She makes a disgusted noise. "We saw a girl *die* like this," she says. "Your brother's got some post-apocalyptic fever, and you're going to drink?"

Dean shuts the pantry door and takes the bottle back to the couch, turning the bottle over in his hands, considering. "Hell, it's whiskey, right? A bit of dust don't mean shit." Jess stares at him as he uncaps the bottle, takes the first swig. "Yeah," he says, nodding after a moment. "S'fine." He sees her face, disbelieving, and takes another drink, deliberate, just to see her eyes get wider. He's sorely tempted to laugh, but instead, he just says, "What?"

Jess throws up her hands. "He could *die*!"

"And you think getting drunk is a bad idea? Jesus, Jess, if I flipped out like this every time Sammy got sick or injured, I'd be a mess by now. Balding by age thirty, all that worry. Kid doesn't really live a healthy life, you know?" If Sam were conscious to hear it, he'd snort at the fake calm in Dean's voice, but Jess doesn't know him well enough. Hasn't seen enough of him to be able to tell the difference. Fleetingly, he thinks maybe it's what she needs to hear, someone calming her down. He tries not to think about what happens if he's wrong.

She huffs an angry breath. "I'm going to check on him," she says, and Dean shrugs.

"He's asleep, Jess. Let him. He's exhausted. Immune system shot to shit. Give him a break."

She glares at him. "You saying this is my fault?"

Dean groans. *Fuck* hormones, Jesus Christ. He holds up his hands, shows her his palms like a peace offering. "Of course not," he says, and on that, at least, he can agree with himself. It's not Jess's fault Sam's obsessive, not her fault he keeps himself up all night watching her, too scared she'll just up and die on them if he so much as takes a wink.

"It's just how he is," he says, and Jess turns her head, takes a

shaky breath.

"Yeah," she mumbles. "Sorry. I'm just. How the fuck am I gonna take care of a kid if I can't even take care of him?"

Dean snorts a laugh. "S'prolly what he asks himself every fucking day." He takes another swallow, then offers her the bottle.

Jess looks at him like he's suddenly sprouted a second head or something. "I'm *pregnant*," she says, somewhere between disbelief and hysterical laugher. "I mean, I know you don't like me, but—"

Dean shifts uneasily, bringing the bottle back to his side. "I like you fine. That sucks, though." He tips the Jack at her. "Bet it'd make your life helluva lot easier if you could."

The smile slips from her face. "No," she says, and when he frowns, she shakes her head. "Not the drinking. I mean—you don't like me just fine, Dean. You think I took him away from you."

You did, he thinks. He tugs at the collar of his tee shirt. It's winter outside, again, but inside the cabin feels like a fucking sauna. Maybe it'll help Sam sweat the fever out, at least.

They sit silently, and Dean lets the glass of the bottle grow hot in his hand. He takes another sloppy swallow, wipes a trickle away from his mouth before it can slip down his neck. He almost forgets her sitting there. He doesn't know how long they're quiet, listening to the crack of the fire and the slosh of whiskey as the empty space inside the bottle grows until the Jack's half gone and his limbs are thick and heavy. This is the only way he ever feels relaxed any more.

He hears his name, blinks at her. Jess's brow is creased, and she leans forward, pulling the bottle from his hand. She sets it heavily on the table, out of his reach.

"I'm sorry," she says, and when she turns her head, he sees she's crying. His stomach rolls unpleasantly.

"Jess, don't—"

"No. No, I want to—look, I'm sorry this happened. I'm sorry I fucked things up for you—I didn't mean to. I never…" She shakes her head. "I need your help, Dean. With Sam, with this kid—shit, with this *family*," she hiccoughs a laugh. "I don't know how to—I don't know him like you do. I thought I did, but I can't—"

The words sink into his brain slowly. "You'll be fine," he says hoarsely. He moves slowly, trying to keep his coordination as he sits up. He hesitates before he sets one arm over her shoulders. "You're gonna be fine, Jess. Can't fuck up more than I did, huh?" He tips his chin towards the door, Sam's bed behind it. "Shit, long as the kid's not too much like him, everything's gonna work out great." Jess giggles, tries to stifle it behind her hand, and he squeezes her a little closer. "Y'know. Long as the kid's shorter and not as useless in the kitchen." He shrugs. "Less fucked-up psycho visions of the future. Doesn't run into shit so much."

"What?"

"Not an ounce'a coordination. Fine in a fight, dunno how, but not so good goin' up against walls, you know? I mean—"

"No, I—visions?"

It takes him a minute to backtrack, to realize what he said. To place the look on her face. Shit, he thinks. Goddamn Sam and his fucked-up sense of morals, of what protection means. Dean's gonna kick his ass once he gets back on his feet, swear to fucking *God*.

"He didn't tell you," he says slowly, and Jess really does laugh this time, laughs until she's clutching at her sides and her eyes are watering, and Dean's more than a little terrified, and really fucking confused. "Jess?" he asks, and she shakes her head, gulping down air.

"I am going to *kill* him," she says finally, between fading giggles.

"It fucking *figures*. Jesus Christ, Sam."

"Kid's a moron," Dean agrees tentatively. "Not a clue how to deal with real people."

She slumps against him, and Dean resettles his arm, tries to make her more comfortable while Jess rests her hands on her belly, steadying her breath. Every so often, she mumbles another curse under her breath, laughs a little to herself, shaking her head. It isn't amusement, he realizes, listening to the in-out of her breath. It's exhaustion, hurt, that brink where the only thing that makes sense is to laugh and hope you feel better on the other side.

She falls asleep like that, pinning him to the sofa. Dean stares into the fireplace and does his best not to think.

::

Sam's fever breaks late the next afternoon. He washes the weight of it off his skin under the rusty spigot screwed to the back of the cabin, Dean at his side while Jess stays in the cabin and tries to take advantage of the working stove, determined to make a real dinner for once, even when they haven't got anything to work with but canned food anyway. At least it'll be warm.

Like every showerhead in the universe, this one's too short for Sam, and it's actually pretty damn funny for a while, watching him twist and swear as he tries to rinse shampoo out of his hair without banging his head against the wall, trying to work the pump at the same time. Still, all that writhing and cursing twists around in Dean's head pretty damn quick, leaves him half-hard and irritated.

"You're gonna get sick again," he warns Sam through gritted teeth, watching Sam's skin turn up goose bumps with the cold. Even in his jacket, Dean's uncomfortable; it isn't any warmer than yesterday out here, and the water isn't heated.

Sam ignores him, just mutters back through chattering teeth, "I can't believe you told her."

He's repeated it so often by now Dean's getting a little worried, wondering if maybe the fever addled Sam's brain any. Jess confronted him about the visions the second he could sit up in bed, gave him hell while she made him drink about a gallon of water, watching him closely to make sure he sucked it all down, like there was somewhere he could hide it if she didn't. Dean suspects Sam would've shouted back if he'd had the strength to do it.

"The hell was I supposed to know? You told her about everything else. You should've told her about this, too, Sammy. You've gotta talk to her; girl doesn't know what she can trust you on anymore."

Sam grunts, an annoyed noise out of his throat. "Gimmie the towel," he mutters, and Dean hands it over, carefully keeping his eyes above Sam's waist while Sam dries off his hair and knots the towel around his hips.

imagine the houses, part 7

Seven.

It spirals after they leave Colorado. Dean listens to them fight their way across the country. Shouting from behind the wall of their own room, irritated whispers from across the fire when Dean's supposed to be asleep, his back turned to them. The words don't matter, lost in the drywall or in the wide stretch of land going out in all directions around them, just their tones making it to his ears. He sees Sam looking more and more battered every day, sees Jess grow angry, exhausted.

In a room in Alabama, Jess falls asleep with her head in Dean's lap while he and Sam talk shop, parsing out exactly what Sam's visions might mean. They stalled for a bit, he tells Dean, right after they found each other, and now, having come back, they're useless—people he doesn't know, in places he doesn't recognize. They don't know where to go to help. They've gotten bloodier, too, he says, all of them death and pain and nothing he can do. Dean listens to his brother talk and sees something inside Sam shatter, the last dregs of any idealistic belief he once had that the world could be fair, that their family's fucked up code could do any real good, anymore.

"I don't fucking know," Sam whispers, elbows on the table, head hunched between them. His gaze flicks to Dean's face, and then to Jess, peaceful in Dean's lap, and Dean has never seen a sadder smile. He wishes he could punch himself out, since Sam won't man up enough to do it.

"She's sick of me," Sam says, like this is what they've been talking about all along. "Sick of everything. I just wanted to—fuck, Dean, I just wanted her safe. I didn't want her to have to be scared."

"She's stronger than you think," Dean says, even though Jess has looked anything but strong lately. Less bleeding, cramps coming at her every once few weeks, and even as she says over and over that nothing is wrong, she looks brittle, like if she trips she could smash to pieces and they'd never know how to put them back

right. She still won't let them leave the hunting and go looking for a doctor instead, fights them every fucking inch.

Sam tilts his head, looking at her, her hair spread over Dean's lap, her chin hooked over his knee. "I love her so fucking much," he whispers, and Dean shifts uneasily, closes his eyes for a moment so he won't have to see that look on Sam's face.

He can't hate her anymore. If he's honest with himself, he might even love her. But the break in Sam's voice undoes him, makes him want to throw her to the ground and yell to his brother that he's right fucking *here*, that he can give him whatever it is he's trying to get from Jess, that Sam can take from him whatever it is he needs.

And that, too, would be easier if the blame belonged to Jess, if she were being irrational—hell if any of them were—but she isn't, and neither is Sam. They are all guilty, stretching back to things they don't even remember doing, words they can't remember having said. He's tried chasing it through his memory, this thread of things that went wrong, and it goes too deep, back when the world was whole and they knew their places, and maybe even before then, too.

"I'm going to bed," Sam says quietly, and his chair scrapes heavily at the wooden floor when he pushes away from the table and leaves the room.

Dean doesn't say goodnight. He eases Jess off him long enough that he can get to his feet, get a bottle from his duffel. He doesn't give a damn what it is, as long as it makes the shuffling in his head go still.

::

They get separate rooms in Cincinnati. Dean picks the lock on his own damn door and disappears behind it before they've got time to think about it.

He digs deep in his bag for a drink, a distraction, and he comes up

with a package wrapped in brown paper instead. The journal, forgotten since he pulled it out of Red's cupboard back in Louisiana.

On the other side of the cardboard walls, he hears rising voices again.

Dean's never read it before, never felt like he should. He's heard Dad reread bits aloud, trying to remember, make connections, but it was always John's book, so carefully prized, a record of things, and indisputably *private*—Dad never told them much about his hunts alone, either, not unless he had a lesson he wanted to teach. Dean hesitates before he lifts the cover.

I buried my wife today, it starts, his father's handwriting shaky, the letters drilled hard into the paper, rising up bumps on the other side of the page. It goes on, messy and near impossible to read. Thirty pages of grief, the ink smudged in places, corners crumpled and torn where his father's hand shook too hard. For the first time in months, he thinks about his father's mission, the whole reason for all of this. It aches in his chest, hurts that they somehow *forgot*. Maybe it started as excuses, no way to track information, no way to find new leads, but—

We'll find it, he promises silently, shuts his eyes and wills his father's spirit to hear it. *We'll finish it, Dad. I swear*.

He reads, and he hates himself for thinking his own simple, stupid problems could hold a candle to this, to the suffering of great men. They aren't even *his* problems, he thinks bitterly. He's just helping make them worse, not knowing how to stop.

A door slams in the next room. There's a pause, like a deep breath. Sudden quite.

Jess doesn't knock, just lets herself in, and Dean watches her calmly. This is nothing new. All part of their ritual, lately, how she retreats to him to steady herself before she goes back to Sam and they start at it again.

"You okay?" he asks quietly, and Jess shakes her head, seething.

"He's just so—" she stews for a moment, can't even think of a word. And Dean knows, understand completely. He didn't spend the first eighteen years of Sam's life fighting his brother tooth and nail to misinterpret what she means now. He knows how it is to love Sam and want to break his goddamn neck all at the same time, all because of stupid things that never matter, not really, building on each other for months until it all goes to hell in one great swoop.

Next door, the pipes creak mournfully.

"Prolly trying to drown himself in the shower," Dean says, shrugs, trying to coax a smile out of her. "Won't work, though. Too tall. Fuckin' freak of nature." He waits for her to take a breath, to laugh, but it doesn't come. Her face is flushed red. The anger drains out of her slowly.

She turns and locks the door, then walks to him. He's learned this part of it too, and he holds out his hand, opens his arms for a hug, but it doesn't come. Jess kisses him instead. Her tongue pushes between his lips, clumsy with fading adrenaline, or maybe she just doesn't care. Dean all but holds his breath, careful not to move, and when she pulls back, the anger is swelling again. This time, it's for him.

"Goddamn it, Dean," she says, and he tries to argue, tries to tell her something about what is or isn't right. She laughs at him, the same threadbare desperation he heard from her in that fucking cabin in the Rockies. "I don't care," she says. "Please, Dean, I don't—"

She fumbles with her shirt, pulling it up over her head, tugging at Dean's belt before she bothers with her own jeans. "Please," she says again, when she meets his eyes and sees him staring back at her. He can feel it on his face, knows it's all laid out for her: uncertainty, shame, want. He should try to hide it, but he doesn't.

He helps her out of the rest of her clothes and she tries tugging off

his, and it takes longer than it needs to. He feels like a teenager again, unsteady, unsure. She leans over him and his fingers slip on the clasp of her bra. It falls away, finally, straps sliding down her arms, and Jess slips her underwear down her legs, kicks it away. Dean takes a moment, takes in the sight of her—miles of quickly sloping skin, soft curves—and Jess makes a noise, tries to twist some way to hide herself. "Don't," she mumbles, "Don't look, I don't—I just want to—"

He ignores her, his dry palm sliding over the round of her stomach, and it's wrong, so fucking wrong, because this belongs to his brother, this part of her. It is Sam's and Sam's alone. She shouldn't offer it to him.

"Dean," she whines softly, fidgeting. Her skin is tight with the chill in the room, her nipples peaked. She takes his hand, presses it to the wetness between her thighs, keens as his loose fingers brush accidentally against her clit. Dean wants to pull away, run, drop to his knees in front of his brother and beg some kind of forgiveness, but his cock is heavy, curving towards his belly, and Jess is slippery and hot on his hand, and Dean isn't sure he's sorry enough.

"I don't want to hurt you," he says, and he *knows* it's the wrong thing, knows it's at least half of what this is all about, how she feels smothered by them, but he doesn't care. Sam isn't wrong to worry.

"Don't you fucking start," she hisses, heated. She lowers herself onto the bed, thighs spread over him. Dean goes when Jess nudges him up towards the center of the bed. She sinks down on him without warning, and he groans, hears it so loudly in his own ears he's sure Sam knows what's going on even through the walls and under the bathroom spray. He mumbles something about a condom, and her laugh is harsh in his ear when she dismisses it with a roll of her hips.

Jess is tight inside, and her skin is burning when he touches her, when he slides a hand along her soft hip, up over her stomach and to her breasts, heavy. She keens, presses into his space, closer.

"God," she whispers. "God, Dean." He pushes back and she curses softly. "Harder," she begs him, grinding down.

He watches her as they rock together, jacked up weirdly on one elbow so he can see. Her head tips back, her lip caught between her teeth to block the noises. They hear the pipes shudder again, water shutting off, and Jess mumbles something he can't hear, clenches tight around him. Dean bites his knuckles as he comes, clinging to her with one hand, holding her close.

After, she picks up her clothes, washes her face in his bathroom sink.

"Don't tell him," she says softly, and Dean watches her from the wet mess of the bed, sees her reflection in his mirror. It won't matter if Dean says anything or not.

"He'll know," he says quietly. Even if she doesn't trail the smell of sex into Sam's room, it's right there on her face. She wasn't built for lies.

Jess drops the damp hand towel in a pile by the sink. She falters for a moment, then makes her way across the little room and to the door. "Thanks," she says softly, and Dean doesn't know what he's supposed to say to that.

"He loves you," he says instead. Her fingers tighten white over the door knob.

"So do you."

The thought hangs in the air for a moment, but by the time Dean catches up with it, Jess gone.

::

Jess doesn't come to him the next time she and Sam fight.

They fight less, actually, but only because she spends most of her time now sleeping, longer and longer every night, until two weeks

later, she hardly ever moves except when Sam makes her eat something, makes her drink. She lies curled around herself looking like all her energy's been drained. Watching her, it truly terrifies Dean for the first time that they don't know exactly when they baby should be coming, knowing only that it's close.

Cramps start bothering her again, and Dean almost tells Sam a hundred times about how she came to him in the motel room, how this is somehow all Dean's fault, even though she was fine for days after he touched her. He's just desperate, maybe, wants that dead look off Sam's face, wants to give him someone to blame so he can work it out, instead of just floundering and watching her sleep, tense and waiting for things to go to hell.

"We need to find somewhere," Sam says, watching her, his face expressionless in the firelight. "She can't be on the road like this, Dean, it'll kill her."

They drive along the rivers for three days until they find a place, people settled by a fresh stream. Jess mumbles arguments out of habit, *fine, fine*.

The townsfolk watch them drive up, look at their busted car, their weathered faces, and they offer a place for the night. One woman gives Jess her little cabin, her bed, even when most of the people are still sleeping in tents spread out over the rocky ground.

She puts Jess to bed like a mother, like Jess is a child, and she asks for the baby's father. Dean watches with an angry pit in his stomach as she pulls Sam aside, but he doesn't know who the anger is for, what about it bothers him this way.

"She says there's a midwife," Sam says when he gets back, Dean sitting by the fire pit with a whetstone and his knives. He wonders what the hell kind of people have passed through before that the townspeople don't even blink when he rolls the blades out in front of them and sets to sharpening them.

"A midwife," he says slowly, and Sam nods.

"A doctor, really—she was a doctor before all this. A couples hours on foot down the river. Should be easy with the car."

Dean nods, brushes his thumb over the edge of the blade, testing. "Jess won't like it," he says, like Sam doesn't know, but his brother only shrugs.

"It doesn't matter. If we can get her through this alive, I'll be happy."

They sit for a while, just the two of them. It's different without Jess at their side, even asleep. The woman with the cabin—the schoolteacher, Sam said—told them to leave her be for the night, threatened them if they came within five feet of her door, saying how Jess needed rest more than anything. Sam almost tried throwing holy water on her, just to be sure it was safe. Dean almost didn't stop him.

"I was thinking," Sam says finally, and Dean looks up from his handiwork for just a moment.

"Never a good sign," he mutters, and Sam rolls his eyes.

"We met these people, when we were in the library. Back during the storm."

"Yeah? And?"

Sam shrugs. "They invited us to stay. We could try. See if they made it home. Said there was plenty of room if we needed it. It might be good to have a base."

Dean laughs. "You talk this over with Jess?"

"I will. Look, Dean you said it yourself—there's no village we've run across that's any good for raising a kid. I'm not saying we stop hunting. I'm just saying we could have a place to go to, time to time."

Dean rubs his eyes tiredly. "You don't even know if this place is

still standing. If they made it back there alive."

Sam opens his mouth like he's gonna say something, try convincing Dean again, but instead, he shuts his mouth with a click of teeth and shakes his head.

They fall quiet again, listening to the grating of the whetstone, the pop of the fire. Frogs bellow at them from the creek.

"We can try," Sam says finally, and Dean sighs.

"Yeah, Sammy," he answers. "We can try."

::

They find the next town by midday, looking just the same as the last. The people come to the dirt-floored clearing that is town square and watch the Impala pull to a stop.

"They told us there was a doctor," Sam says, eyes searching the little crowd. The people nod, step aside to let her walk through. She's a strong-jawed, capable-looking woman who introduces herself as Donna, barely glancing at either of them as she marches up to the car. "She's been tired," Sam's saying quickly, "Probably hasn't had enough to eat, sleeping a lot—cramps, too, she's been in pain."

Donna leans in, one hand on the open door for balance. She examines Jess's curled-up shape in the seat. "Cramping," she repeats, not looking back at him, and Sam nods, hair falling in his face. Once this is over, Dean's gonna take a pair of garden shears to it, swear to God.

"There was some blood, early on, but not for months now. Lately it's just—"

"Fine," she says, with a crisp nod. "My cabin is over there."

Dean pulls the car up to the little wooden shack, and Sam kneels by the backseat, touches Jess's face gently from the open door.

"Jess?" He asks gently. "Jess, wake up for a minute, okay? We just need you to move—we've got you a real bed." Her mouth works sleepily and she makes a soft noise, a half-mumble. Her brow creases, a thin wrinkle of pain. Sam's voice shakes. "Jess?"

The doctor pushes him out of the way as the whimper leaves Jess's mouth. She's still for a moment, watching, and then she spins around.

"Get her in there," she orders tightly, pointing towards her cabin. "*Now*."

She pulls away so Sam can get at the car, and Dean sees the red just starting to bleed through the blanket. He holds the door to the cabin open, lets Sam carry her through. His heart races in his chest, aching. Behind him, Donna yells something he can't hear, and what looks like every woman in the village comes running. They almost crush him storming the house, and a moment later, Sam is bodily pushed out of the cabin, ordered to stay away. It would be funny if Dean didn't feel ready to throw up.

::

It's winter here. Not cold, but night falls on them early, dusk settling in just a few hours after they get there. They sit on rough-hewn benches around the fire pit. Distantly, they can hear the women shouting to each other, running this way and that.

A girl comes by once, asks them questions they mostly can't answer, how far along things are, when Jess last felt this ill. Dean does his best to tell her what she needs, knows Jess hasn't told Sam anything in months, too tired with what she decided was unnecessary fuss, even when it obviously wasn't. Sam doesn't move when the girl leaves, stares at the same spot for four hours.

Before, whenever things went wrong, even when they were at their worst, Dean could at least break his brother's reverie. He's useless, now, nothing he can say to make this better. There's nothing for them but the wait.

The dark settles, and one of the men from the village comes with new wood for the fire, tries his best to smile at Dean when he passes, an awkward, hopeless look. He's sure that any other day, the fire's the center of all things, where folks meet together for lunch or bump past going from one end of the town to the other. Today, they've barely seen anyone, nobody wanting to disturb them, nobody wanting to share their tense silence.

"The visions," Sam says quietly, all of a sudden, and Dean almost jumps at the sound of his voice when it breaks the stillness. "I… I didn't see this." His voice breaks, and for the first time Dean imagines his brother as a father, remembers when Sam was a small boy and John sat awake every night, watching them, with books or with a bottle, empty-eyed, looking for their mother's peace.

"I didn't—" Sam tries to wave it off, tries to shrug his shoulders. He crumples under his own weight, falls in on himself, draping over his knees in the dusty glow of the fire. Dean shifts, lays an awkward hand on his back. "So it doesn't happen," he says, trying to keep his voice level. "She's all right, Sammy. They're both all right. It's gonna work out."

Sam's shoulders quake. His presence shrinks, and in between flickers he looks like a boy again, scared and folded in against the world.

This is the moment, Dean realizes: he had his in Missouri, on his knees in the dirt by the signpost for a town that no longer existed. It took Sam longer to get it, he thinks, even though they've said it a million times, even though Sam knew it—he'd always hoped. It took him this long to truly understand that the world they knew is gone.

"Sammy," he says, and slaps encouragingly at Sam's back once, twice. "C'mon, man, stay with me. It's going to be okay."

Sam nods, but he keeps shaking long after his eyes are dry. His whole body seizes and his lungs won't take in air, and then it's

gone. Again and again, like a fist gripping and then loosening its hold. Finally it stops, Dean holding Sam against his chest like he used to when they were kids and Sam was scared of the monsters that took Dad away from them so often, laying awake waiting for him to come home.

A man comes to them with quiet footsteps. He clears his throat from behind them, like he expects them to spring apart, guilty. Dean glares, holds, but Sam untangles himself and stands. Dean follows.

Sam's voice is thin and reedy, still weak from his sobs. He licks his lips and says, "Have they told you anything?"

The man shakes his head. "My Alma figured you boys might want a place to sleep," he says. "She said things could take a while."

"Take a while," Sam repeats faintly, and the man shrugs.

"We got a cabin for guests. I can show you."

Sam shakes his head. "Can we see her?"

"Doctor don't want anyone in there who doesn't need to be. S'a small room."

Dean's thankful they left the guns in the car, otherwise he might actually try to shoot this guy. "This cabin," he says, and Sam turns to look at him, but doesn't say anything.

The man nods, points into the trees. "Little ways that way. I'll take you."

It's gloomy, out of sight of the village, but someone's set a fire flickering inside the little grate. They can see it from the path. The name on the door says *COBB* in crooked letters, scratched into the wood with a blade. Nailed to the wood beside, the rain-smeared paper still reading, *QUARANTINE*. Dean wonders what Cobb died from, but he figures the guy was a sonofabitch anyway, building his house far out of sight of his neighbors.

Inside is empty but for one bed, and a pile of rough blankets at its foot, enough for two. "I'll take the floor," Dean says, bending to untie his shoes. He hears Sam suck in a steadying breath, and there's the soft rustle of bed sheets and the mattress shifts when he sits down.

"Dean," he says, and Dean looks up. Sam looks torn. His eyes are wide, near terrified, but he holds out a shaky hand to his brother. "Don't," he whispers. "I want—with me. We can—I mean, if you want to, I—"

Jesus. Dean shoves his hands in his pockets. He wants to say yes, wants to wrap himself around his brother and never let him up for air again, but—

"What about Jess?"

Sam shuts his eyes, looking pained. "It's not… this isn't about her. I mean, *everything's* about her. Shit, it should be. I love her, but I—I can't—"

Dean's heart feels like it's trying to beat its way out from behind his ribs. "Whatever you need, Sammy," he says, voice low, and he prays to God he doesn't sound eager, because this isn't about him. It isn't about how fucked up Dean is that he still wants Sam like this—shit, how he's hoped for it, silently begged every day since the last time, since Sam left. Dean shuffles forward on his knees to his brother, sitting on the low bed, watching.

They don't have anything. Dean's pretty sure he's got a tube of slick somewhere in his back, still, but their duffels are still in the car. He sucks Sam off instead, hard and messy, letting Sam buck his hips, fuck his mouth. He lets Sam work off whatever hurt he can like this, his fingers pulling at Dean's hair, cock sliding hard over Dean's tongue.

Sam keeps mumbling what sounds like his name, caught in a loop, over and over, "*Dean, fuck,* ***fuck****, please*—" and the urgency in his voice goes straight to Dean's dick, but he thinks of Jess and he

keeps his hands firmly planted on Sam's thighs, doesn't so much as undo his jeans, because it's somehow all right if this is just about his brother, if it's just Sam needing something, anything—it makes it all right if it isn't the two of them together.

He clings to that thought as Sam twists, tries to pull him off, warn him away. Sam comes down his throat and Dean swallows, and he doesn't reach for himself. Sam hauls him up and kisses the bitter taste of his own come from Dean's mouth, and when he reaches for Dean's fly, Dean smacks his hand away.

"Don't," he says, and his voice is a hollowed-out whine. Maybe Sam understands, because he doesn't argue. He only nods.

Dean's knees ache from the floor, and he sits himself down on the edge of the bed. "Sleep," he says and the blankets rustle when Sam slides between the covers, still naked, and turns on his side to look up at Dean, who gets to his feet, wishing for a cold shower as he walks to the little window, stares out into the black.

"Stay with me," Sam says quietly, and already, that hopelessness is creeping back into his voice. Outside the window, something flickers. "Dean," Sam says, "Please, I—"

He sees the flicker again. A flashlight beam working its way up the twisting path. "Someone's coming."

Sam's eyes widen. He throws back the covers, scrambling for his jeans. "You think something went wrong?" he asks, and Dean doesn't know, hasn't got a fucking clue.

Sam's pulling on his shirt when the knock sounds at the door, and he answers it still fighting to get it over his head. It's on backwards, the tag sticking up from his collar.

Donna studies him for a long moment when he opens the door. Her jaw tightens in a way that tells Dean she knows exactly what they just did, could see it all over their faces even without Sam's flushed cheeks and badly twisted clothing to prove it.

"Is she all right?" Sam asks, and the doctor looks for a moment like she can't believe he really cares. Dean sees the guilt it calls up on Sam's face, and he crowds behind his brother at the doorway, touches his hand to Sam's spine where Donna can't see.

"She's exhausted," Donna says slowly. "But once she rests, she should be fine. It was a hard delivery. She almost didn't make it."

Sam stares at her. "Delivery?"

Donna nods, unimpressed. Her eyes flick from Sam to Dean and back. "You have a daughter," she says coldly. She turns to go, pausing a few steps from their door to say, "You can come down and meet her, if you'd like." Scornful, and if Sam weren't blocking his way, if she hadn't just told them Jess was alive, Dean would break her fucking neck.

::

Jess is asleep when they get there, the same pale color as the fresh sheets beneath her. Donna glares at them when they come in, but the girl in the corner, the one who came to them earlier asking questions, smiles brightly at Sam and carefully hands him a bundle of blankets. A wrinkled, purplish-looking thing squirms inside, and Dean knows Sam will be scared stiff in a minute, as soon as it hits him, but for now, he watches the grin spread over his brother's face, impossibly confused.

"Dean," he says, waves him over, and Dean goes to his brother's side and stares. Sam shakes his head. "Jesus, man, *look*."

Dean feels himself smile, too, and he answers, "Yeah, Sammy. I know."

::

Sam doesn't leave the cabin until Jess wakes up the next afternoon.

The friendly girl brings them food, actual eggs and bread, and

Dean has to take the baby from his arms so Sam will stop staring at her, confounded, long enough to eat it. Dean doesn't say it aloud, but he marvels at the tininess of her—the fingers on her small hand, her *toes*. The idea that this baby is somehow related to his Sasquatch of a brother is more mind-boggling than anything else.

Jess stirs as Sam finishes his food, Dean's still untouched. She sits quietly for a moment, smiling at them, and then says, "Dean, let me—" and holds out her thin arms while Sam rearranges the pillow behind her so she can sit.

He bends over her, kisses her, mumbles something about how scared they were, how much they love her. Dean feels the cold slip in his stomach, knowing this isn't his to have, this moment.

Jess watches him, frowning lightly like she's trying to figure something out. "You boys have fun last night?" she says finally, and her tone makes it perfectly clear. Maybe it's mother's intuition, or maybe she heard Donna raging yesterday, picked it up on some subconscious level before he and Sam arrived. He doesn't know how, only that as soon as Sam registers what she's said he crumples, lost in apologies and explanations. He lays his head in Jess's lap and cries, mumbles wetly into the blankets. She doesn't yell, doesn't even look that hurt, just strokes his hair with one hand, their child cradled in her other arm. "I know," she tells him every once in a while. "I know."

::

They leave the next morning, Jess agreeing to stay another night in Donna's infirmary cabin on the condition that both of them leave her alone and go sleep. Donna blinks at her when she sends them off, disbelieving, and Dean guesses the bitch told her after all, but Jess ignores it and smiles at him when he says, "Are you sure?"

They leave at dawn, and the whole town comes out to see them off, cooing at the bundle in Jess's arms. It's terrifying, Dean thinks, and he can see the fear on his brother's face, but it's hopeful in

the weirdest of ways, and he figures that's why the people gather to stare, why their eyes shine.

Jess squeezes her way in between them in the front seat when Dean settles behind the wheel. Dean looks away from the road too often to look at them, Sam and Jess and their daughter. Jess names her Molly, after nobody she knew before. She jokes that it's because all of the mollycoddling that led to them being here, with her in their arms, and Sam and Dean both fall silent.

She looks from her left to her right, expression calm. "I don't care," she says quietly. "What you did—it doesn't matter. I understand." Sam makes a noise in his throat, and she shakes her head. "It doesn't make sense," she says quietly, and Dean stiffens, but Jess soothes a hand over his shoulders.

"I mean *this*. This thing for all of us. It doesn't make sense—why do we have to choose?"

She says it just like that, like it's that easy. So simple and straightforward Dean thinks for a moment she can't possibly mean what she does. Jess shrugs, and Molly makes a soft noise in her arms.

"I love you both," Jess says, turning her head this way and that, looking at both of them like a tennis match. "Why can't I?"

The question hovers between them. Sam runs his fingers through Jess's hair, tilts her head towards him and kisses it. He says, "Dean?"

And Dean swallows hard. "You're both crazy," he says, and Jess laughs.

"Yeah. We're in love with you."

They don't speak again until they cross the state line into Nebraska.

Epilogue.

They find Luke's farm, the house still standing. He comes out onto the porch when the Chevy rattles up in the drive, and his eyes go wide and he shouts, gleeful, calls back over his shoulder. A moment later, Mel comes through the front door.

The second she sees them, she starts *screaming*, squeezes the air out of them with her hugs. Dean's standing a little too close when she catches sight of Molly; by nightfall, he still feels like he's got cotton balls stuck in his ears, and he isn't sure he'll ever hear properly again.

There's a bedroom big enough to hold the three of them and a crib, but Mel insists on decorating a nursery, even when they warn her they won't always be around, that they'll drift in and out. She's too excited at the prospect for anyone to talk her down.

For the first time in years, Dean packs his things into a real closet, lays his bag, empty, in the bottom drawer. It takes him a while, almost two weeks to adjust before he can make himself unroll his clothes and actually fold them, setting them on the wire racks, and Jess watches him from the bed as he does it, her shirt unbuttoned and Molly suckling at her breast. "It's not forever, Dean," she reminds him, watching him examine the closet like it's some great mystery of the unknown. "Think of this as a hub, right? This just gives us somewhere to go back to."

"Yeah," he agrees, because he believes her.

He leaves his father's journal on the nightstand as a reminder, and he finds Sam flipping through it later that evening. His brother looks up at him, a strange expression on his face and asks, "Did you read this all the way through?"

It's the last pages that are really meant for him, detailing every new thing their father learned about their mother's killer before he died, compiled in one place. Dean remembers the spirit sitting across his campfire, his father's last orders to finish things off, his own promise to do just that.

"It was a demon all along," Sam says, turning the pages. He points to something. "Dad thought he knew a way to kill it."

Dean squints at his father's handwriting on the page. "A magic gun?" he says, and it sounds even more ridiculous aloud than in his head. "Seriously?"

But there's a name, an address, a hunter Dean thinks he might remember. They're staring at a map when Jess sits down at the kitchen table beside them. "That's not too far," she says, when they explain. "You going tomorrow? Shouldn't take more than a couple of days, right?"

"We can wait," Sam says. "'Til Molly's a little older. We can wait until you can come with us."

"You don't have to. This is about your family, not mine."

Dean snorts, shakes his head. "Same damn thing," he mutters, and Jess smiles.

She taps at the map with her fingers again. "You'll be back in a few days," she says. "This gun—it's just the beginning."

She and Molly see them off a week later, in early morning, while the rest of the house is still asleep. They both kiss her goodbye, Dean awkwardly, still adjusting to the idea that he's allowed to. They haven't had time, to talk it over, to *try*, but Sam and Jess seem unconcerned, and Dean isn't used to being the worrier, doesn't like it, so he shuts his mouth and just lets himself trust.

"You better not get yourselves killed without me," Jess orders as they toss their bags in the trunk, lighter, now, that they're not packed tight with everything they own.

"Promise," Sam says, and Dean echoes him, and Molly chimes in from Jess's arms, makes a burbling little sound that he and Sam carry with them all the way there and back.

end.